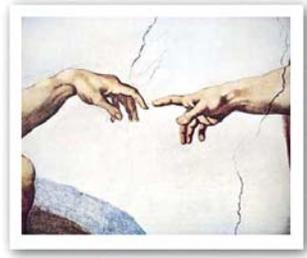


# LIFE ON THE VINE



# GOODNESS

## PREPARE

Read all the assigned Scriptures listed on page 3 of the participant guide. In addition, consult a Bible concordance to locate various references to *goodness* throughout the Bible. Look up a few of the references. Then read these passages from the Psalms to see how the word *good* is ascribed to God: Psalms 23:6; 27:13; 31:19; 65:4; 68:10; 145:7.

Reflect on what comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “She’s a good woman,” or “He’s a good man.” Then reflect on what comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “God is good.” What does the word *good* mean in both instances? Read the Romans 7 passage and consider the connection between what Paul calls *good* and human sinfulness.

Read Chapter 7 in Kenneson’s book, paying particular attention to why Kenneson believes the notion of “Christian self-help” to be misguided.



Invite a group member to supply the fruit to share during the meeting time. This week’s suggestion is strawberries.

*Set up the room: Have the items ready for the welcome table as well as Bibles and copies of the learner guide for group members. Check out from your church library or a public library several “self-help” books, particularly ones offering some method for having a “good” life. Spread them out on the floor in front of the worship table.*

## PRAY

As part of your discipline of preparation this week, pray Psalm 23.

## GATHERING AT THE TABLE OF GOODNESS

### *In Advance*

Prepare the welcome table by arranging the bowl(s) or tray(s) of fruit brought in to share. Open the Bible to Galatians 5 and place the white pillar candle or taper nearby. Be sure to have matches or a lighter handy for the person designated to light the candle.

### *As People Arrive*

Greet everyone. Introduce newcomers and visitors to other class members. Keep in mind that bearing the fruit of the Spirit begins the moment the first person walks in the door.

### *To Open*

Just prior to getting started, pass around the fruit so those who've arrived can enjoy it. Reserve a portion of the fruit as a display on the worship table. Once it's time to start, call attention to the worship table. Invite everyone to focus on the fruit on the table as you read aloud Galatians 5:22-23. Light (or have someone else light) the Christ candle on the worship table.

Conclude the gathering time with prayer. Consider using Psalm 68:4-10 as your starting point.

## EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF GOODNESS

Begin by asking group members to recall the last time they heard someone described as a "good woman" or "good man" or "good kid."

- ◆ What is the definition of the term "good" in those instances?

Then ask the group to recall singing the chorus, "God Is So Good"—perhaps in worship or on a retreat. Or if you have a hymnal, find the hymn and read (or sing) the words.

- ◆ How do you define the term "good" when it is used to describe God?

Kenneson's observes that when we say someone is a good person, that judgment "entails believing something about the purposes of human existence" (p. 157).

- ◆ Where do we get our notions of the purpose of human existence and of what counts for goodness?
- ◆ Look at the book title advertised on page 2 of the participant guide. What cultural assumptions about the meaning of the word good are reflected in the book title and ad copy?

# EXAMINING THE FRUIT OF GOODNESS

## *Character of the Fruit*

Kenneson makes three points to locate the character of goodness within the witness of Scripture (see book, pages 158–160).

1. The consistent witness of Scripture and the church is that **God alone is unequivocally good.**
2. If human bondage to sin makes us incapable of goodness apart from God, **we are created with the capacity for goodness.**
3. If God alone is good and we are capable of good only by the work of God's Spirit, then **knowing what counts for good can only be determined under the guidance of God's Spirit.**

Consider these points by assigning each one to a smaller group to address, using the following questions as a discussion guide.

### 1. God alone is good.

Read Romans 7:4-25 and discuss these questions:

- ◆ How does Paul understand the relationship between sin and good?
- ◆ Paul calls the law or the commandment “holy, just, and good.” What about God's commandment makes it good? And why doesn't God's good commandment make us good?
- ◆ Why do you think Paul is so adamant that good does not characterize our human condition?

### 2. We have the capacity for good.

Read 2 Peter 1:3-8 and discuss these questions:

- ◆ What does God give that enables us to “support [our] faith with goodness”?
- ◆ What does the claim that “we may become participants of the divine nature” say about our capacity for goodness?
- ◆ What specific actions or behaviors are necessary on our part to participate in God's goodness?

### 3. God's Spirit guides us in knowing what counts for good.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 and Colossians 1:9-10 and discuss these questions:

- ◆ How would you describe the connection between the work of God's Spirit and our “good work”?
- ◆ What do the various admonitions in Paul's words to the Thessalonians have in common?
- ◆ In light of the world we live in today, and in spite of our world's definitions of good, what does it mean to “hold fast to what is good”?

### *Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit*

Kenneson highlights three perceptions that contribute to our confusion about the real nature of “goodness.” Identify each one below and use the accompanying exercise to prompt discussion. In the interest of time, you may want to choose only one or two to address.

#### *General cultural conviction: good equals decent and law-abiding.*

Recall a time, in childhood perhaps, when you learned that being distinguished from your peers as “goody-goody” made you an object of scorn. Or recall an occasion when you engaged in “less than good” behavior simply because you didn’t want to appear to others as “too good.”

- ◆ What is the downside to “goodness” defined primarily as decent or law-abiding?

#### *Storytelling in the media: goodness is little more than the absence of badness.*

Identify some contemporary television or film depictions of “good guys” and “bad guys” in which neither group is clearly identifiable from the other (Example: spaghetti westerns featuring Clint Eastwood).

- ◆ How do the stories television and film tell shape our understandings of goodness? What are the consequences of that?

#### *The “self-help” movement: goodness is cultivating one’s own potentialities.*

Invite group members to tell about the last “self-help” book they read or program they used. Talk about what motivates our desires and efforts to “improve” ourselves and where those motivations come from.

- ◆ What effect does a self-help way of thinking have on a person’s view of sin? on the church’s capacity to talk about sin?

## BEARING THE FRUIT OF LOVE IN THE WORLD

### *Cultivating the Fruit*

Kenneson urges us to see goodness, along with the other fruits of the Spirit, as other-directed in two ways: (1) the character and ultimate story of goodness must be drawn from God who alone is good, and (2) our reflection of God’s goodness is to be aimed at drawing others to God. Discuss what impact the church might have in the world if its people embodied goodness as Kenneson suggests.

Consider this statement from page 174:

*“Confession, preaching, imitation. These are three important activities we need to recover if God is going to cultivate goodness in the life of the church.”*

*Offer these action/reflection ideas for the coming week:*

- ◆ Evaluate your church’s practice of corporate confession. Reflect on your own practice—or avoidance—of confession, not simply to God but also to another Christian.  
—How might a renewed emphasis on confession, or naming our sin together, help a congregation to bear the fruit of goodness?
  
- ◆ Consider making the effort in the coming weeks, following worship, to ask these questions of one another:  
—What word of God have we heard? And what should our response as a congregation be to that word?
  
- ◆ Kenneson reminds us that Paul repeatedly invited his fellow Christians to imitate him.  
—Whom would you choose to “hang out” with in order to learn how to bear the fruit of goodness?  
—What young Christian would you consider inviting to “hang out” with you for a while on your faith journey?

Close by praying these words from Galatians 6:9-10:

*“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”*