**“I Know I AM” – Week 2 (Gracious)**

**September 23/24, 2017**

What’s going on guys! It’s the 2nd week of our “I Know I AM” series, and I am pumped for what we’re talking about today! Before I do that, I want to take a minute and tell you about the greatest Christmas present I’ve ever gotten since you guys discussed it earlier in your opening group time.

**(Leaders Note: Share about your favorite Christmas gift.)**

Here’s the thing that is so cool about getting gifts: you don’t have to earn them. We don’t call that medal you get for winning a race or a spelling bee a gift…because you earned it. It’s the same with the paycheck you get every two weeks or that crisp 20 dollar bill for mowing a neighbor's lawn. Why? Because you earned it. We call that a prize or reward.

Check out what Ephesians 2:8-9 says about a gift that God has given to us: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—**not by works, so that no one can boast.”* In this passage Paul calls the salvation we have received from God a gift. Furthermore, he describes this gift from God as “grace.” The word “grace” can simply be defined as undeserved love or favor from God. Grace is INCREDIBLY important to who God is. Our THP today focuses on the grace of God.

**THP: We are completely surrounded and covered by God’s grace!**

There are a TON of passages in the Bible that talk about grace, but let me just highlight a few…

Romans 3:22-24: *“This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*

Hebrews 4:16 : *“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*

1 Peter 4:10: *“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.”*

One of the cool things about the Bible is the way Jesus told stories. We call these stories parables. In one particular parable, Jesus highlights the idea of grace in an awesome way. You can find it in the New Testament in Matthew 20:1-16.

*“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. “About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. “He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ “‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. “He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard. ’“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ “The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. “These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ “But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ “So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”*

In this story, there are basically two types of workers: the workers who get hired early in the day and the workers who get hired closer to the end of the day. Maybe a better way to put it is those who we think deserve a day’s wages and those we think do not. It’s easy to see grace on display with the workers who are hired later in the day…especially those who only work an hour and get paid a whole day’s worth of wages. It’s pretty clear that the owner of the vineyard gave them a gift that they didn’t deserve. They didn’t do the work necessary to earn the payment they received. What a perfect example of undeserved love and generosity!

On the other hand, it’s more difficult to see that those who were hired earlier in the day also are recipients of grace. In fact, it may even be tempting to say they were cheated out of making a more “fair” wage. But let’s take a second look at this parable…

First of all, let’s notice the fact that these are day-laborers. These are people who are seeking out work on a day-to-day basis. Did you know this type of work still exists today? There are many people, even here in America, that depend on this type of employment to support their families. Every day they gather in the same spot and hope that a farmer or landowner will call them out to work for that day. It’s sporadic, and there is no guarantee that they will have the opportunity to earn money on any given day. Every day they wake up wondering whether or not they’ll be working that day, and every day that they get the opportunity to work is a gift. How difficult would it be to live with that uncertainty? It’s easy to imagine the relief these workers must have felt whenever they were picked for the day. That’s why, in the parable, the vineyard owner and workers came to an agreement that a denarius would be the payment for a day's work. (By the way, a denarius was widely acknowledged to be an appropriate amount for a full-day of work.) And, as you can imagine, in the moment these workers were grateful, and I’m sure very relieved.

However, by the end of the day, something changes. They go from being grateful, to actually complaining to the vineyard owner about the payment they receive. What changed? Was the work different than what the vineyard owner described? No. Did they work longer than anticipated? No. So, what changed?? THEIR FOCUS At the beginning of the day they were grateful for the opportunity to work, but as the day went on and the owner of the vineyard started bringing in more workers they started sizing everyone up. Who’s a harder worker? Who deserves more pay? And at the end of the day when they see workers they consider “less-than” getting paid the amount they were originally promised, they figure they must be getting more. When the owner pays them what they originally agreed (the payment they were once grateful for) they become upset and complain. Not necessarily at the amount, but the fact that other workers who worked a fraction of the time they did were getting paid the same amount. They believe that the owner owes them more.

Now I want us to put ourselves in this story. Jesus says that this is comparable to how the kingdom of heaven looks, so lets look at it through those lenses. I see this happening quite frequently among Christians, especially among those who have been following Jesus for a long time. To be honest, I see it in myself sometimes. When someone first trusts in Jesus they are excited and grateful. Grateful for the promise of eternal life. Grateful for a restored relationship with God. Grateful for a renewed sense of purpose and value. But eventually, that’s not quite enough. After following God for a while, we start to think that he owes us. That God is somehow in debt to us because we’ve agreed to follow him. This becomes especially true when we see others thriving or succeeding in life that we don’t think deserve it. Who haven’t worked as hard for God as I have. So we start to complain and gripe and moan, and forget that every single one of us live, move, breathe, and operate in the grace of God.

Did you realize that? Grace is more than just Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. Every new day that we wake up is a gift from God. Every meal we eat and breath we take is an undeserved, gracious gift. Now, you might be thinking, “Isn’t that a little extreme?” Not at all. Let’s look at what the Bible says in Romans 6:23 about what we deserve: *“For the wages of sin is death…”*

If the wages (or penalty) for sin is death, then that means that you, me, and every other person on this planet deserves to die because we ALL sin. That is what we deserve. That is the fair penalty for sin. But do you notice something… every one of us in this room is alive. At least I hope…he’s just sleeping right? :-) Seriously though, we’re living and breathing and moving. Not only that, but we have the opportunity to have ETERNAL LIFE! Not just life here on earth, but life ETERNAL!! That’s literally the opposite of the penalty that we should be getting for our sin. THAT is an undeserved blessing. THAT is grace! That’s why it’s always interesting to me when people complain about God being unfair. The truth is, He IS unfair. He doesn’t give us what we deserve (death) and for that I am thankful! When we realize and believe that literally every part of our lives is a product of grace, it changes our entire mindset, and it changes how we live every day of our lives.

I think if we were to be completely honest, we don’t really like grace. At the very least, we are uncomfortable with the concept. We live in a culture that is all about earning whatever we have. Value is attributed based on what you do or accomplish. We can even get offended or defensive if someone gives us something with absolutely no strings attached, thinking, “I don’t need your charity!” We’re more comfortable with the idea that we’ve earned what we have, that we deserve it. But that’s just not true. The sooner we realize that our whole lives are a gift from God, the sooner we can start living in a way that honors Him.

But the reality is that we are completely dependent on God’s grace. We do not have the power to do ANYTHING on our own, and we certainly don’t have the power to earn eternal life. So, rather than letting our pride keep us from leaning in completely to God’s grace, let’s humbly approach God, strip away our pride, and like a kid on Christmas morning, joyfully receive God’s gift of grace every single day of our lives!

Remember how I said that God’s grace transforms our entire lives? Well it does. When we recognize the length and depth of God’s grace in our lives, the only right response is thankfulness. We should be waking up every day thanking God for blessing us with another day of life, and going to sleep thanking him for the day we were just given. God has lavished grace on us so we should lavish thankfulness on Him. Our days should be filled with constant “thank yous” to God. You may be tempted to think that what I’m saying is a little overkill, but I firmly believe that I cannot overemphasize this point. We could use every breath for the rest of our lives just saying “thank you” to God over and over again and it still wouldn’t be enough. That’s how big God’s grace is! I don’t know about you guys…but I know I’m at my best when I have an attitude of gratefulness, and I’m at my absolute worst when I feel entitled or that I deserve everything I have. Gratefulness is not only the proper response, but it’s the healthy response. It makes us better people!

**(Leaders Note: Move into Gospel Presentation)**