

STUDY GUIDE + STREAMING VIDEO

RUTH CHOU SIMONS

WHEN STRIVINGS CEASE

REPLACING THE GOSPEL OF
SELF-IMPROVEMENT WITH THE
GOSPEL OF LIFE-TRANSFORMING GRACE

SIX SESSIONS

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RUTH CHOU SIMONS



HarperChristian
Resources

When Strivings Cease Study Guide

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A NOTE FROM RUTH

Hey friend,

I hope you've picked up this Bible study because you're tired—tired of striving. Of course, I don't wish for you to be weary, but the truth is: I'm glad you're ready to lay down the exhausting pursuit of self-betterment and find God's remedy for our need for approval and belonging. *When Strivings Cease* is my story of freedom from striving, and this study is a journey through God's Word that will show us why Jesus is better than our very best efforts.

Chances are, like me, you find that in spite of what the latest meme says or what funny video your girlfriend texted you this morning, you still don't feel like you're quite enough. For all that's on your plate, for the kids in your care, for the dreams you have, for the friends you long for, for the ministries you wait on others to start. With so many opportunities and resources available to us, why do we still feel like we're not enough?

Well, perhaps it's because we were never actually meant to measure up by popular opinion, earthly standards, religious ideals, or dream-making aspirations. If you've been fed a steady diet of, "You are enough!", you likely believe it all depends on you. Perhaps you're tempted to believe you just need to try harder, get your act together, make a plan, and execute it with precision. You may feel like you're running on empty . . . because you are.

The "You are enough—just improve yourself" narrative has left so many women like you and me exhausted, worn out, and wondering why we can't figure out how to be satisfied or how to stop striving so anxiously.

The answer we're looking for isn't the latest strategy for self-improvement; it's the enduring gift of amazing grace, through Jesus. Together, we will explore the welcome God meant for us to have

by grace, through faith. It is a welcome that replaces striving for approval, striving for self-betterment, and striving to earn love and favor. I am so glad you've picked up this study and are ready to dig into the riches of God's grace, together. I can't wait for you to see just how amazing grace really is!

Because of grace,

— Ruth



HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Each week is split into two different sections—one for the video sessions and group discussion, and one for your personal study.

GROUP SESSION

For the group time each week, I invite you to start by reading a quick opening thought together with a short Scripture passage that will be discussed in the video. There's a warm-up question to help you start thinking about what you'll be discussing for the session—you can have a couple of people share their thoughts or let it serve you as more of a rhetorical question.

As you watch the video together, feel free to take notes or just listen. After the video, you'll use the discussion questions to help process what you've heard. You may or may not talk about every question, and that's okay.

Lastly, there's a prayer prompt to help close out your time together.

PERSONAL STUDY

There are five days of personal study for you each session. Four of the days are designed to help you either revisit a biblical truth or remind yourself of the practical application of that truth, and the fifth day is designed to help you slow down and reflect on the session. There will be 1–2 prompts to get you thinking, but this is your space to translate what you're studying into a personal *application*, so feel free to use it in whatever way makes the most sense for you.

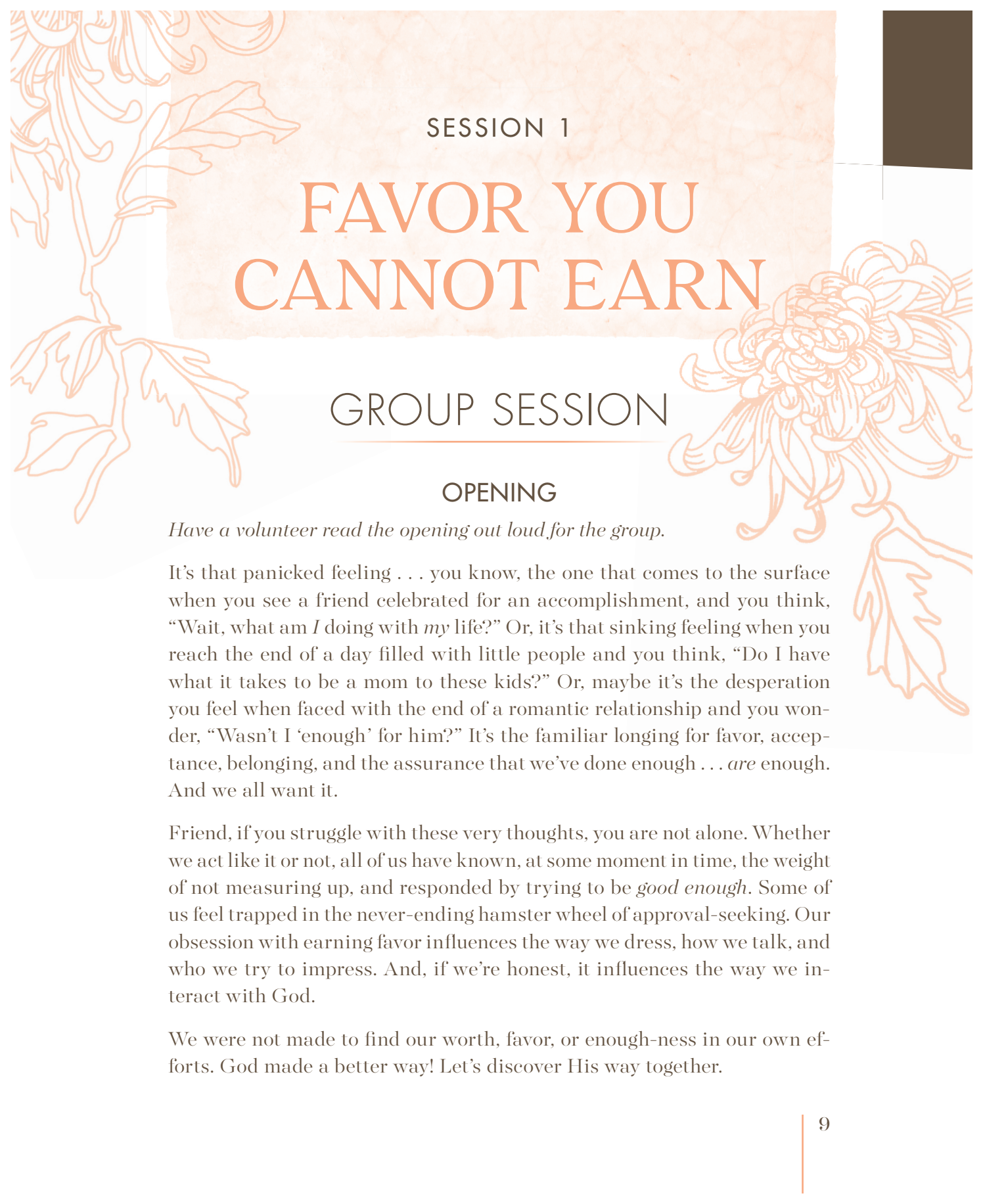
Remember, the goal is to let these truths sink in, not to finish a course.

This study is not a formula or a 5–step plan to success with God (it's actually the exact opposite of that kind of thinking!)

This study is intended to draw you closer to the life-changing, life-impacting truths you may have overlooked in the sea of self-reliance.

This study is ultimately not about you; it's about God. Trust me: slow down and take time to consider all that God has done on your behalf, and you, too, will uncover the freedom when strivings cease.

Gather your people, call a friend, and commit to this 6-session journey together. I'm cheering you on and praying for your encouragement!



SESSION 1

FAVOR YOU CANNOT EARN

GROUP SESSION

OPENING

Have a volunteer read the opening out loud for the group.

It's that panicked feeling . . . you know, the one that comes to the surface when you see a friend celebrated for an accomplishment, and you think, "Wait, what am *I* doing with *my* life?" Or, it's that sinking feeling when you reach the end of a day filled with little people and you think, "Do I have what it takes to be a mom to these kids?" Or, maybe it's the desperation you feel when faced with the end of a romantic relationship and you wonder, "Wasn't I 'enough' for him?" It's the familiar longing for favor, acceptance, belonging, and the assurance that we've done enough . . . *are* enough. And we all want it.

Friend, if you struggle with these very thoughts, you are not alone. Whether we act like it or not, all of us have known, at some moment in time, the weight of not measuring up, and responded by trying to be *good enough*. Some of us feel trapped in the never-ending hamster wheel of approval-seeking. Our obsession with earning favor influences the way we dress, how we talk, and who we try to impress. And, if we're honest, it influences the way we interact with God.

We were not made to find our worth, favor, or enough-ness in our own efforts. God made a better way! Let's discover His way together.

Focus SCRIPTURE

Open your Bibles and have a volunteer read this session's Scripture out loud for the group. It doesn't matter which translation you have—reading God's Word together is always a good idea!

Ephesians 2:1–10

Warm-Up QUESTION

Take a few moments to think about the question individually before asking for 1–2 volunteers to share their answers with the group.

Share a circumstance or situation in which you've wondered if what you're doing is really enough or a time when you've questioned whether God is pleased with you.

WATCH THE SESSION 1 VIDEO

Feel free to use this space to take notes.

Scriptures
referenced in
this session:

Genesis 3

Romans 5:8

Ephesians 2:1–10

Hebrews 4:16

GROUP

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use the following questions to help process the themes from the video session. You may not get to every question and that's okay!

1. Describe how you have wrestled with approval from either God or another person close to you. In what ways has your wrestling positively or negatively affected how you relate to others and to the Lord?
2. With whom or where have you felt the most “welcome”? What specifically made you feel that way? How has such a feeling impacted your expectations in other relationships and circumstances?
3. For better or worse, briefly explain who or what has most shaped your view of God and His character? Do you believe this influence has been an accurate reflection of God's character or has *it* skewed your understanding of who God is? Discuss the ramifications of this influence.
4. What comes to mind when you hear the words *unmerited favor*? Share your best definition of the word *grace* and compare it to Ruth's definition. How does the idea of never being worthy of receiving a huge gift make you feel?
5. In what specific ways can you fight the current culture of “strive, hustle, earn your place”? Name a few and if you cannot, listen and write down a few ideas to put into practice or try out.

6. Do you find it easier to give or to receive? Why? What is it about giving or receiving that makes you feel good? In what ways do you or don't you translate those feelings to God's feelings for you?

PRAY

Spend some time praying together before dismissing the group.

Take a few moments for group members to share how they think this study will challenge them and then ask one volunteer to close in prayer, asking God, by His Spirit, to open your eyes to who you are, who He is, and how His grace really can change everything.

PREPARE FOR NEXT SESSION

Make time before your next group meeting to work through the personal study on the following pages. Do as much as you can to get the full benefit from the teaching.



SESSION 1

FAVOR YOU CANNOT EARN

PERSONAL STUDY

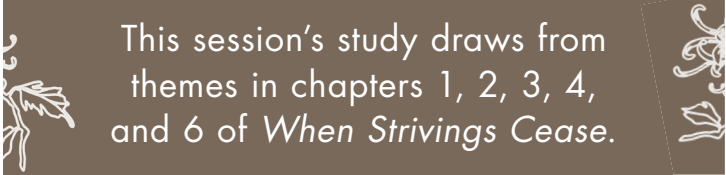
DAY

1

THE REALITY OF SIN

TRUTH

The brokenness you feel is sin,
and sin broke our relationship
with God and His favor.



This session's study draws from
themes in chapters 1, 2, 3, 4,
and 6 of *When Strivings Cease*.

If my goal in this study is to blow you away with the amazing-ness of God's grace (and it is!), I must first remind you how broken we are as sinners apart from grace. We need to take a step back and take a look at a couple of truths:

who the Bible says we are and who the Bible tells us God is. It might feel like review if you've been walking with Jesus for very long *time*, but these truths are foundational to where we're heading, and I want to make sure we're on the same page. (And I promise: these truths are more wonderful than you and I realize day by day!)

If you take even a minute to think about it, the fact that you can't get away from the presence of sin isn't a surprise to you; you know who you really are . . . you know your own thoughts and actions. Truth is, if you're like me, you've spent a lot of time trying to cover up sin on some level, in order to hide the brokenness you feel. We're intimately acquainted with our shortcomings, the gaps they create in our lives, and our inability to "fix" ourselves. Do you feel overwhelmed by the brokenness of sin you see and feel at times? I want you to know that you're not alone!

OUR COMMON PLIGHT

It's actually an age-old problem that can be traced back to the first book of the Bible. When Eve doubted God, believed Satan, and ate the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, sin entered creation. And every man, woman, and child since then has battled temptation and sin. They have wrestled with the fact that they cannot change who they are at the most basic level. And, even when we want to deny it, or pretend like we're inherently good people who just make bad decisions, we can't get away from what the Bible has to say about it.

Read Eve's story for
yourself in Genesis 3.

It's all over the New Testament, too. In the book of 1 John, the apostle is writing to a group of believers who were wrestling with questions about who they were, in light of some false teaching that had cropped up among them, namely gnosticism.

All that to say, part of what John addresses in his letter is the reality of the presence of sin. He wants to remind the people of what is true.

- Is it easy or difficult for you to recognize sin in your own life? Why?
- What is your typical response to recognizing sin? Do you rush to cover it up? Quickly confess it to God? Something else?

15

- What does John say we are doing if we say we have no sin?

There are many passages that tell us about who we are without Christ . . . what our natural default position is. Look up each of the following passages and write down what you learn about human nature from it.

Psalm 14:1–3	
Jeremiah 17:9–10	
Romans 3:23	

Based on these passages, how would you *summarize* what the Bible says about human nature?

Again, if you're being honest with yourself, none of this is news to you, right? And, if asked directly, I doubt if any of us would deny the presence of sin in our lives. But how do our day-to-day actions reflect our awareness of sin? Do we *functionally* believe we're without sin? Are we *practically* making God a liar?

HOPE ON THE HORIZON

If all of this conversation about the reality and presence of sin is weighing on you, stick with me—stunning grace is just around the corner!

Romans 6:23 tells us that the “wages of sin is death.” But praise God it doesn’t end there—it goes on to tell us that the free gift of God is eternal life!

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Romans 6:23

We are sinners with easily deceived hearts, *but* God pursues us with tremendous love and makes a way for us to see sin as the shackle it really is. Jesus is the only one who can rescue us from sin; apart from Him, our sin remains unforgivable, alienating, and blinding in its deception. Grace is this incomprehensible provision that seems both impossible and everything we could ever ask for all at once. Experiencing the grace of God through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection is an incredible gift—one that we’ll spend the next six sessions exploring together.

TRUTH

The brokenness you feel is sin,
and sin broke our relationship
with God and His favor.

GET PRACTICAL

If you've already decided to trust Jesus for salvation and His gift of grace, write a prayer below acknowledging who you are without Him and thanking Him for salvation. You might also take this opportunity to confess any sin that the Spirit of God might bring to mind.



Salvation is God's rescue of sinners—forgiving and bringing us near to Himself—that we might be made holy and whole through the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, as payment for our sin.

If you haven't yet trusted Jesus and are still learning about what it means to follow Him, I'm so glad you're here! I'd love for you to read a note I wrote for you in the Appendix.

DAY 2 AN OLD TESTAMENT PICTURE OF GRACE

TRUTH

Grace is more extravagant
than we know.

Grace is a word that gets thrown around a lot, isn't it? Whether it's a pretty plaque at Hobby Lobby, a song on the radio, or a sermon at your church, it's a word you've heard—probably several times. We even used it in yesterday's study! Today we're going to explore what it really *means* by looking at a picture of it in the Old Testament.

If you're a believer, your brain might jump right to Jesus as a picture of God's grace, and you're absolutely right! As it turns out, there are pictures of grace in the Bible long before Jesus comes to earth, too. Grace is part of the story God has been writing from the very beginning.

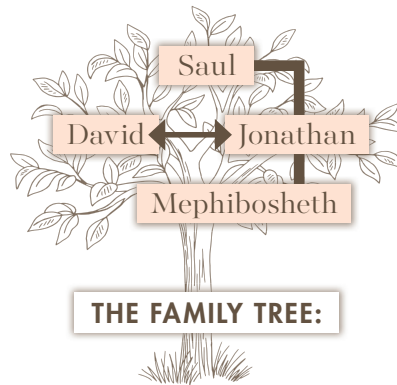
OLD TESTAMENT GRACE

Every time we catch a glimpse of grace in the Bible, it's designed to point us to Jesus. This is especially true in the Old Testament.

OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
Books of the Bible focused on God and his people before Jesus' arrival to earth	Books of the Bible focused on Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, as well as the birth of the early church

One of my favorite Old Testament pictures of grace is the story of a guy named Mephibosheth. Mephibosheth was the son of a man named Jonathan

and the grandson of a king named Saul. Jonathan was the best friend of David, who reigned as king of Israel in an important era of Jewish history.



The friendship between David and Jonathan was unique—several times the Bible tells us that Jonathan loved David “as he loved his own soul.”

Read more about Jonathan
and David’s friendship

1 Samuel 18:1–4

1 Samuel 20:14–17

2 Samuel 1:23–27

Jonathan died in battle when his son Mephibosheth was just five years old. When Mephibosheth’s nurse gets the news about Jonathan, she gathers him up to run away (fearing the next wrath of a new king), but he falls and becomes lame.

We don’t know a lot about his story after this point until the book of 2 Samuel picks it back up. Many years have passed, and at this point, David has taken his place as king over Israel. He remembers his friend and one day, asks the question: “Is there still anyone left in the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”

Indeed, there is—Mephibosheth.

 Read 2 Samuel 9:1–13

- How does verse 11 summarize David’s attitude toward Mephibosheth?
- How does David show Mephibosheth generosity?

Mephibosheth should have been considered an enemy as the living relative of a previous monarch—that was why his nurse gathered him up so quickly to run when Jonathan died—but David treats him like his own son, inviting him to feast at the king’s table for the rest of his life. Do you see grace on display?

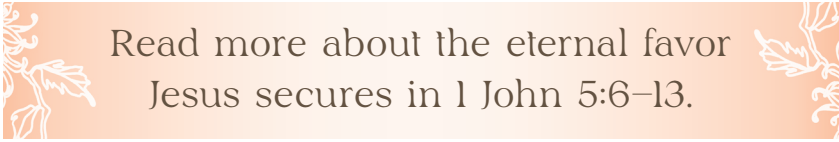
PARALLEL STORIES

Consider what the following passages tell us about who we are and what grace does.

- Romans 5:10—Without Jesus we are God’s _____.
- Romans 6:23—Because of sin, we deserve _____.
- Romans 8:15–17—Because of grace, God has _____ us into his family.
- Ephesians 1:11—Because of our adoption, we’ve received an _____.

Do you see the parallels? The way Mephibosheth’s story points to our own? We are cast away—far off, removed, and unable to draw near to God until God makes us His children, not because of anything we had to offer—but because of His great and generous love!

Mephibosheth's story points us to Jesus, who will take it even *further* than the account of Mephibosheth can cover. When we receive the grace of God, our favor is fixed for *eternity*.



Read more about the eternal favor
Jesus secures in 1 John 5:6–13.

TRUTH

Grace is more extravagant
than we know.

GET PRACTICAL

It might be the most famous verse in the Bible . . . but it's also a wonderful picture of God's generosity, spoken by Jesus Himself.

- Write down John 3:16–17.
- In what ways can the truth in John 3:16–17 change your perspective or encourage you today?

DAY 3 UNMERITED FAVOR

TRUTH

You can't earn a free gift.

Do you remember the first real paycheck you ever earned? Wasn't it thrilling to hold that piece of paper? (Well, after the disappointment of seeing just how much money was taken out for taxes!) There's a beautiful satisfaction in *earning* something you've worked hard for.

American culture is somewhat famous for a work ethic that promises return on hard work. If you want more money, you can work to make it happen. You can *earn* whatever you set your mind to achieve. While it's an inspiring thought for my fellow entrepreneurs and I, this type of linear relationship *isn't* how grace works.

The simplest definition of *grace* is "generous, unmerited favor." Unmerited means it cannot be earned, but that doesn't mean we don't try, right? It's so unbelievably good that it's hard for us to wrap our minds around it.

We looked at the generosity of grace in the Old Testament yesterday, so today we're adding in the New Testament to help us get a full picture of the scope of grace.

GRACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Greek word *charis* (which we translate as grace) is used 156 times in the New Testament.

Charis: good will, loving-kindness, favor of the merciful kindness by which God, exerting His holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues²

Let's start with a quick overview of how the New Testament describes grace. Read the following passages and **write down what you learn about grace** from each **one**.

John 1:17	
Acts 20:32	
Romans 3:23–24	
Romans 4:7–8	

² “G5485 – Charis – Strong’s Greek Lexicon (ESV).” n.d. Blue Letter Bible. Accessed July 14, 2021. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g5485/esv/mgnt/0-1/>.

Romans 5:1–2	
Romans 5:8	
2 Corinthians 12:9	
Ephesians 1:7	
Ephesians 2:8–9	
2 Thessalonians 2:16–17	

Based on these passages, **summarize** *what* grace is, *where* it comes from, and what it *accomplishes* in your own words.

What grace is:	
Where grace comes from:	
What grace accomplishes:	

A GIFT

In the book of Romans, Paul (we’ll talk a lot more about his story in session three) sets out to explain the gospel—that the righteousness of God is available through faith for all who believe.³ In chapter 5, he talks about how similar to sin coming to all through Adam, the gift of grace has come to all through Jesus.

ADAM	JESUS
Sin enters the world.	Grace comes to the world.

Read Romans 5:12–17.

- How does Paul refer to grace in verse 15?

A quick count reveals that Paul uses this same phrase 5 times in three verses (vv. 15–17). He’s really trying to drive it home: **Grace is a *free* gift.**

By nature, “gifts” are intended to be free, right? But I’m sure we’ve all navigated circumstances where a “free” gift was given, but it held an expectation of reciprocity. It may not cost you anything, but it’s not exactly free. Many of us have also found ourselves trying to *earn* something that was intended to be given freely—perhaps the love or approval of a parent?

This is where our personal experiences can taint our view of God and how He works. If you’ve spent a lot of time trying to earn someone’s favor or have been given gifts with an expectation for being “paid back,” it’s easy to

3 “ESV Introductions – Study Resources.” n.d. Blue Letter Bible. Accessed July 14, 2021. https://www.blueletterbible.org/study/intros/esv_intros.cfm#at_Romans.

assume that you need to earn God's favor, or that His gifts have strings attached. But that's not how He operates.

Are there specific circumstances that tempt you to think you earn God's grace? Sometimes this lie is so subtle that it's easy to miss. For example, if I have a tough afternoon, I sometimes catch myself thinking, "If I'd read my Bible this morning, this afternoon probably wouldn't be so hard." A friend of mine who was single for longer than many of her closest friends used to wrestle with thinking if she could just "get it together" spiritually, God would send a spouse her way.

While reading my Bible in the morning is a good thing, it doesn't *earn* me God's favor in the afternoon. And my friend wasn't going to *earn* a husband because of something she was or wasn't doing spiritually. Do you see how sneaky believing we have to earn grace is?

- What about you? Where in your life are you tempted to think you need to earn God's grace or favor?

Because our experience and the emotions tied to them aren't always reliable, we have to return to the Word of God over and over to tell us what is true.

- Write Ephesians 2:8–9.

This is what's true! God knew we'd never be able to earn His favor, so He made it a gift we only have to receive.

TRUTH

You can't earn a free gift.

GET PRACTICAL

Rewrite Ephesians 2:8–9 in your own words. (I know this exercise can sometimes feel like an impossible task but putting things into our own words helps solidify them in our hearts and minds. I promise, it's worth the effort! If you get stuck, try reading the verse in several different translations to help you get started.)

DAY 4 NOTHING TO PROVE IN CHRIST

TRUTH

You have nothing to prove when
your identity is in Christ.

I'm a mom to six young men who regularly find themselves in arm wrestling matches, sprint races, and weightlifting competitions. It's always friendly competition, but these boys are definitely trying to prove something with one another. My version of proving myself is much more subtle (and requires much less physical stamina!). Have you ever relied on your skills, appearance, or achievements to prove yourself? Have you ever tried to establish your worth or detract from your feelings of being "not enough" by being impressive? I know I have.

It's our fallen nature to want to make ourselves look as good as possible—to prove to others, and to God—to secure our own enough-ness with our own abilities. Sin caused us to feel fear and shame, and we've been trying to prove ourselves ever since.

IN THE GARDEN

Let's turn back to Genesis again. We see Eve in the garden of Eden questioning who God has made her to be and whether what He has provided is "enough."



Read Genesis 3:1–6.

- What does the serpent ask Eve in verse 1?

- What lie does the serpent tell in verse 4?

The serpent is exposing an underlying insecurity that Eve has—that the knowledge and sustenance God has given her already isn’t enough. That there’s more for her to “get.”

- How does Eve evaluate the fruit in verse 6? What three things does she notice?

It would taste good, it looked appealing, and it would make her wise. Eating the forbidden fruit seemed to promise her “more.”

It’s no wonder we battle the same underlying questions about our identity and enough-ness. Like Eve, we look to things that seem to promise us “more” and we throw ourselves into them. We base our identities in what we do, what we don’t do, what we own, who we follow, or causes we support . . . even though none of those things will deliver on making us “more.”

- What are some things you're tempted to base your identity on?

Even when we *know* the truth—that God's favor is *unmerited*—convincing ourselves that we truly don't have anything to prove is difficult. All it takes is a passing comment, a social media faux pas, conflict with a friend, or too much time in our own heads for our insecurities to surface.

So, what do we do when we find ourselves tossed to and fro? When we **embrace** and **rehearse** the fullness of gospel grace, we're freed to stop the endless pursuit of proving ourselves. We must return to God's Word to rehearse the truth of who we are in Christ and what grace has accomplished on our behalf.

Look at Colossians 3:1–3 with me

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are _____, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your _____ on things that are _____, not on things that are on _____. For you have died, and your life is hidden with _____ in God.”

What two instructions are given here?

1. _____
2. _____

Are the things you're tempted to base your identity on (that you just listed above) things “above” or “things on earth?”

- What's the good news at the end of the Colossians passage?

If you've put your trust in Jesus, your God-given, grace-bestowed identity is secure. You have nothing to prove, friend! In Christ, you are enough and you have enough.

TRUTH

You have nothing to prove when
your identity is in Christ.

GET PRACTICAL

Look up each of the following Scripture passages and use what they say about who you are to write an identity statement that begins with, "In Christ, I am . . ."

WHAT THE WORD OF GOD SAYS	IDENTITY STATEMENT
John 8:36	In Christ, I am . . .
Romans 5:10	In Christ, I am . . .
Galatians 4:4–5	In Christ, I am . . .
Ephesians 1:13	In Christ, I am . . .

WHAT THE WORD OF GOD SAYS	IDENTITY STATEMENT
Ephesians 2:4	In Christ, I am . . .
Philippians 4:19	In Christ, I am . . .
Colossians 1:13-14	In Christ, I am . . .
1 Thessalonians 1:4	In Christ, I am . . .

- Which statement is the most difficult for you to believe or internalize? Why?
- Write a prayer asking God to help you believe what is true and rest securely in your grace-given identity.

Flip through this session's personal study and write down 1-2 things that stick out to you.

- Now, it's time to think about how this applies to your life. Here are a few prompts to get you started. Take some time to reflect and/or journal and pray over what you're learning.

- How have you in the past, or are you now, trying to earn God’s favor?
- What examples of God’s “generous, unmerited favor” can you see in your life? (Be as specific as possible.)
- Who are you “in Christ,” and how does that affect your daily life?