**Explore God Week 7 – Can I Know God Personally?**

**Message Big Idea**: The way to knowing God is not by striving and trying harder. It’s through knowing and following Jesus.

**Scripture:** Romans 3:9-24, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Jeremiah 31:33-34

NOTE: You will need a scale and weights prop for this message.

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**Introduction: Messing Up**

*(Series Graphic) (Tell a personal story about messing up as a kid – or about your kids messing up – and trying to “make up” for it)*

Let me start off by asking…

* How many of you got in trouble a lot as a kid? *(Hands)* I appreciate your honesty! Sometime I want to hear some of your best stories!
* How many of you were goodie two-shoes when you were growing up? *(Hands)* All right, it takes a lot of courage to admit you were a boring child so I applaud you too!

I’m just kidding. I (Tammy) was a goodie two-shoes myself, but there is one incident from my childhood that I remember so vividly it’s hard to believe it happened over four decades ago.

I was about 5 years old at the time, and I was in my backyard playing with some of the neighborhood kids. There were several older girls there, and I think I must have been trying to impress them because when my 4 year old neighbor, Shawn, came over to show me a new book he just got, I have no explanation for my behavior. I took a crayon and scribbled emphatically on every page of Shawn’s new book.

Well, as you might have guessed, Shawn ran home and told his mom, and pretty soon *my* mom yelled from the house that I was to come inside. She sent me up to my room to wait.

So there I am…5 year old goodie two-shoes Tammy…sitting on my bed knowing that I was about to get it. But then…I had a stroke of brilliance! There on my nightstand stood my Children’s Bible. Here was my chance to redeem myself! When my mom came into my room, if she saw me reading the Bible, she’d forget all about my previous transgression, right? So I grabbed that little book off the nightstand, flipped it open, and pretended to be reading.

A few moments later, when the door to my room swung open, I looked up at my mother and asked, “Can you explain what this word means?” as I pointed to a page in the text.

I will never forget my mom’s response. She looked at me with an unbreakable gaze and replied, “Put. That. Down.”

**Weights and Balances**

How I approached my mom as a kid is often how we approach relationships now as adults. It’s like applying Newton’s Law in areas that it was never intended to be applied. **Newton’s Law** says this: **“Every action** *(place a weight on one side)* **has an equal and opposite reaction.”** *(place a weight on the other)* It’s the kind of the idea we lean on when we find the need to put life back in order.

When we mess up, we do something to try and make it right. We ask, “How can I undo what I just did?” or “How do I balance things out?” We might not even realize we are doing this. I think for most of us, this has just become a pattern, a familiar habit of thinking and responding in our relationships.

For example: *(Put weights on scale for “bad” and “good” actions)*

* You are running late and your kids aren’t doing what they should be doing to get out the door and after asking them nicely 23 times to get their shoes on you lose your cool and yell. You feel badly about it all day long and so you treat them to ice cream after dinner.
* Or you promised to be somewhere with a friend and at the last minute you couldn’t make it happen. You feel horrible about letting them down, so you go out of your way to let them know you value them.
* We even do this at work. Maybe you didn’t do your best, the sale didn’t happen, you missed something that cost the company money….fill in the blank….so now you resolve to put in as many hours as possible to reassure your boss that he or she can still count on you.

Do any of these resonate with you? Most of us play this “balancing act” in our relationships in some way. And it’s not to say that it is bad to want to make things “right” after messing up, but the tension we experience putting on this kind of a balancing act can wreak havoc on our relationships. We never know if we owe someone or if they owe us or how much we need to do to ensure we’re not in a deficit with someone. It’s an interpersonal pressure cooker.

And the reality is many of us even carry this “balancing” act into our relationship with God. We think God works the way we work and so we tend to relate to him on those terms. And what happens when we try to balance out things with God? Well, usually one of three things…

**Balancing Our Relationship with God**

*Hit these faster without describing emotion in it. Is there a more parallel or “scale related” (Clear all the weights off scaled)* First, we might **Strive for Perfection**. We work really hard to keep everything off the “bad” side of the scale. And, heaven forbid, if we do mess up *(add weight to “bad”)*, we quickly try to balance things out *(add weight to “good”).* Maybe we go to church or volunteer at our kid’s school or promise to make it through a whole day without swearing.

We start to believe a lie that our good works will balance things out with God. We begin to strive for God’s approval and inevitably, when we can’t be all things to all people and do all the good things that “need” to be done, we feel condemned. We feel unworthy of God’s love and we try to earn his love and approval which only results in more frantic striving.

It’s an exhausting way to live and a very effective tool the enemy uses to keep us perpetually unsure and anxious.

Others of us know we’ll never be perfect so we just **Aim to be Good Enough**. *(add weights to “bad” side)* We know we mess up. We don’t pretend that we are perfect…in fact, we’re pretty annoyed with the goodie two-shoes perfectionists out there! *(add larger number of weights to “good” side)* We just try to make sure that there are enough things on the “good” side of the scale to tip things in our favor. The person who plays this balancing game often says or believes things like, “I’m basically a good person.”

Not sure if we need this…maybe this isn’t how everyone feels. However, this is a tiring way to live as well. We find ourselves always wondering if there are enough “good” things to keep the scales tipped in our favor. It creates a mentality that allows us, and almost gives us permission, to miss out on the life and relationship God wants for us.

*(add lots of weights to the “bad” side)* Finally, I think some of us feel like we have piled so many things on the “bad” side of the scaled that we’re no longer striving, we’re no longer aiming, this one feels too wordy *(***Failing and then Giving Up***)* we think we’ve failed and so we give up. Our mantra is: *“I’ll never measure up.“* And so we resolve to not even try to balance things out anymore. We think, *“I’m going to do what I want to do.”* Under this thin veil of what might sound like freedom, there is a hopelessness and a longing for acceptance that we might not even realize.

*(All 3 Options)* Ultimately, all of these options, Striving for Perfection, Aiming to be Good Enough, and Failing and then Giving Up, leave us in the exact same place. It may take months or years or even decades for us to realize it, but they all leave us in a place of discontentment. And, often the people that I’ve met that have approached God in these ways eventually make the decision to walk away from God altogether. Why? Because it’s too much. It’s exhausting.

Friends, if you have or if you’re thinking about walking away from a god who relates to you with scales…GOOD! I want you to run away from a god like that because that god is not the real God. Do you know the real God and what he’s truly after?

**Jesus and the Scales**

Let me tell you the truth about the scales…

*(put lots of weights on “bad” side)* The truth is every one of us has loaded up the “bad” side of the scale. From the beginning of time, human beings have been making choices that go against the design and will of God, and none of us are exceptions. Paul, an early church leader who wrote much of the New Testament puts it this way:

**“…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…” –Romans 3:23**

With our selfish choices, our half-truths, and our outright rebellion, every one of us has loaded up the “bad” side of the scale. And no amount of “good deeds” is enough to tip the scales in our favor.

**“There is no one righteous, not even one…” –Romans 3:10**

Paul declares.

*(add)* **“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law...” –Romans 3:20**

There is nothing we can do to balance things out! There is nothing we can do to tip the scales in our favor!

But…if you are worried that this is bad news, let me assure you that coming to grips with this reality is the exact point where the news becomes good…really good.

For you see, when Jesus came into this world as our Savior, he didn’t merely take a few bad things off the scales, he didn’t merely tip the scales in our favor; no, he destroyed *(knock over the scale)* this way of relating to God.

Jesus dealt with all the things we work so hard to make up for by taking the punishment for everything upon himself. When it comes to my failures and yours, Jesus did the heavy lifting for us. Paul writes:

**“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” -2 Corinthians 5:21**

What we couldn’t do for ourselves, Jesus did for us at the expense of his own life. He dealt with everything we’ve done destroying our failures on the cross. He credits his own goodness and righteousness to us so we don’t have to bear the burden of working to balance life out on our own.

Friends, this means we can stop striving for perfection. We no longer have to pretend that we’re basically “good enough.” And, we certainly don’t need to give up in despair. For…

* We are loved.
* We are forgiven.
* We are welcomed.
* We are accepted.
* We are set free.

When we put our trust in Jesus - When we put our faith in what he has already done for us on the cross, God credits the righteousness of Jesus to our spiritual accounts.

Yes, **“…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…”** But now *(add)* **“…all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” –Romans 3:23-24**

So many of us make the assumption that God evaluates relationships like we do, that God uses his own version of balancing the scales. But it’s just not true. God is not like us. He has freely extended his grace to us through Jesus. When we come to know the heart of God revealed to us in the person of Jesus, what we discover is that “balancing the scales” has never been what God is really after. What God is after is your heart. God wants a relationship with you.

**Knowing God Personally**

God’s dream has always been to have a people who know him personally. Centuries ago, through the prophet Jeremiah, God made clear what he planned to do:

**“’This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel**

 **after that time,’ declares the Lord.**

**‘I will put my law in their minds**

 **and write it on their hearts.**

**I will be their God,**

 **and they will be my people.**

**No longer will they teach their neighbor,**

 **or say to one another, “Know the Lord,”**

**because they will all know me,**

 **from the least of them to the greatest,’**

**declares the Lord.**

**‘For I will forgive their wickedness**

 **and will remember their sins no more.’” –Jeremiah 31:33-34**

*(Highlight “they will all know me”)* God wants every person to **know** him. When we use the word “know” in English, it typically denotes something we do with our mind and our mental faculties. However, in the original Hebrew language, this word “know” is so much richer. Include some illustration of this…how you “know” another person. In Hebrew thought, to “know” someone is to encounter, experience, and share with that person in an intimate way.[[1]](#endnote-1) It’s about attaching yourself to another person, an act that involves an inner commitment or dedication to that person.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Might not need this. ~~Jesus opened up the way for us to relate to God in this way.~~

* ~~We no longer have to go to intermediary like a priest or a prophet or a neighbor because now each one of us can talk to God directly.~~
* ~~We no longer have to fear God and worry about how to appease him because he has forgiven us and remembers our sin no more.~~
* ~~When we truly come to know him, his love wins us over. He births in us a desire to follow his ways as a response of gratitude to his mercy, his goodness, and his grace.~~

Now, because of Jesus, every person has the opportunity to know God in an intimate and personal way!

**Challenge: Trust Jesus (Baptism Sunday)**

So here is the challenge I want to call every one of us to today: **Quit trying to balance the scales and trust Jesus.** Trust that Jesus has done for you what you haven’t been able to do for yourself.

* You are loved.
* You are forgiven.
* You are welcomed.
* You are accepted.
* You are set free.

The way to God is not by striving and trying harder. It’s through knowing and following Jesus.

There is a very important marker in the life of every person who decides to put their trust in Jesus. It’s called baptism. Baptism symbolizes what it means to die to an old way of living. As we go under the water, we die to that old person, and as we are raised up out of the water, we are given new life, the opportunity to live every day forward in a personal relationship with Jesus.

As we said earlier, today Baptism Sunday. This is one of my favorite days of the year! We already have \_\_\_\_\_\_ people who have made the decision to go public with their faith in Jesus by being baptized. And we can’t wait to celebrate with them! But maybe today, we can celebrate with you too? Perhaps today, Jesus is calling you to this important decision in your faith journey. You know that because your heart is beginning to beat a little faster right now.

Some of you, even as I’m talking are thinking, “I want to take this step to following Jesus…I should be baptized.” But then come all the questions that hold you back…

**Question #1**

You might be thinking: **“I was baptized as a baby, should I be baptized again?”**

Some people were sprinkled as babies in the church. I believe that that is a credit to your parents that they were committed to your spiritual growth. But it was a choice your parents made. When we read about baptism in the New Testament, we find two things that were true of every Christ-follower…

* #1 - The person who was being baptized was always old enough to make that decision for his or herself. It was always that person’s choice.
* #2 – We see each baptism as something that was done by immersion, or by completely going under the water.

If you’ve never made that choice for yourself, I want to challenge you to take this step today. The way I look at it is this - you are actually completing the commitment that your parents made for you all those years ago. So if this is the question that you’re thinking about today, don’t wait, you should be baptized TODAY!

Make this one last…most punch to it.

**Question #2**

You may also be thinking, **“Don’t I need to have my life all together before I get baptized?”**

No! That is a “balancing the scales” view of following Jesus. Here is some amazing news! Baptism is NOT for those who have it all figured it, but for those of us who don’t! No one has it all figured out. And baptism is actually a commitment by those who are ready to acknowledge, “I don’t have it all together, I recognize I can’t save myself, I need Jesus!” If this is the question that you’re thinking today, don’t wait, you should be baptized TODAY!

**Question #3**

Or you might be wondering: **“What if I have family or friends who are not here today that I want to see this?”**

If that is what you are thinking, you should still be baptized! We have a professional photographer who is ready to capture this amazing moment for you so you can share it later with family and friends. If you sense God is prompting you, don’t put it off. You should be baptized TODAY!

**Question #4**

Or maybe today you’re thinking, **“I want to get baptized, but do I have to do it in front of everyone?”**

Let me just encourage you… that’s kind of the point. Baptism is a sort of initiation into a life of devotion to Jesus. If you are willing to get soaking wet in front of a room of dry people to declare your commitment to Jesus, he will be able to use this moment of courage to strengthen you to live for him every day of your life. If this is the question you’re thinking, don’t shy away. Be baptized TODAY!

**Question #5**

Or maybe you’re still holding out asking: **“What if I don’t have clothes to change into or a towel to dry off with?”**

* We’ve got an amazing baptism T-shirt to give you as a gift!
* We have shorts.
* We have towels.
* We have blow dryers to make your hair look perfect again!
* We have an entire team of people right by those doors ready to serve you in order to make this the best experience possible.

**Conclusion**

Friends, God longs for every person to know him personally, to encounter, experience, and share with him in an intimate way.

* We are loved.
* We are forgiven.
* We are welcomed.
* We are accepted.
* We are set free.

If you’re ready to quit trying to balance the scales and put your trust in Jesus, you should be baptized TODAY!

**Communion Idea**

We celebrate communion as a way of reminding ourselves and thanking Jesus that he wants a relationship with us. In fact, Jesus is all about relationship. He came to this world to restore our relationship with God, who he taught us to call Father. He took our sin and shame on the cross so that we can be with him now and for eternity. He made a way for us to be called children of God, sons and daughters of The King of Kings. He crushed the scales when he conquered death and rose again. He is the living God. He never leaves us nor forsakes us. His Holy Spirit lives in us so we are never alone.

Do you know this Jesus? He is inviting you into a relationship with him. It’s a relationship unlike any you have ever known. Will you say yes today? (if you want to celebrate your decision to say yes to Jesus, please find a prayer team member in the back of the room)

1. Wilson, M. R., *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian faith*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 287-288. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Heschel, A. J., *The Prophets*. (Perennial classics New York: Perennial, 2001) 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)