

# The Gospel According to *The Office*

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## Overview

The purpose of this series is to find points of connection between the reality depicted in *The Office* [NBC] and the reality described by Christianity. Each talk seeks to expose some aspect of the human condition and then explain how the message/person of Jesus might address (or relieve) it. For the theologians out there, you should know that the series' developers (and Mockingbird Ministries) are firmly committed to the traditional Reformed understandings of original sin, God's grace to sinners, and justification by faith alone. We believe, along with St. Paul, that the Law only came in to increase the trespass, and only God's one-way love to suffering sinners saves them. You'll see these themes as you read on.

## Why Use *The Office*?

The characters and stories of *The Office* are fairly universal. There are geeks, heroes, anti-heroes and everyday Joes, all of whom are struggling with things like love, greed, power, and terrifying mediocrity. The show finds much of its humor in the darker aspects of the human condition, and it does so in a way that we hope will make it easier to address serious themes.

One of the dangers in a project like this is that it can suck the fun out of the show. Though *The Office* is in no way a Christian show, we believe it is funny because in many ways it accurately depicts the truth about human life. And if we believe Christianity is true, it should be able to speak to the issues raised in the show. Some of the connections we draw might feel like a stretch, but again, the point is to get people talking about their real lives, and thinking seriously about the Gospel of grace for sinners.

## Using This Guide

This series has proven effective in ministry settings with young adults. It tends to draw people in their 20's and 30's because, for many, it is already one of their favorite shows. For them, watching an episode and discussing its themes doesn't feel "churchy." Our hope is that these materials will allow churches, para-church organizations, and small groups to offer "The Gospel According to *The Office*" (TGATTO) in their communities.

This guide describes how TGATTO has been run in the past and should take some of the guesswork out of running it in your setting.

## Format

TGATTO has seven sessions, each of which centers around a full episode. All but one of the selected episodes come from season 2. You don't have to use all the sessions; they work independently as well as in sequence. Feel free to pick and choose based on your context and time frame.

Typically, the series is offered in weekly meetings, thus a seven-week series. But it has also been used in week-long retreats, with one session per day. In the weekly meeting format, each session proceeds as follows:

- Welcome and opening Prayer: 2 min
- Dinner (Pizza is tried and true, but feel free to be creative): 30-45 min

- Introduction of the Episode: 2 min
- Showing of the Episode: 22 min
- Optional Small Group Discussion: 5-10 min
- Short Lecture on the Show: 15 min
- Large Group Discussion: 30-45 min

Overall, the whole evening should not take more than 2 hours. If you have young families that might be interested in attending, we suggest you provide childcare in your church nursery.

### **Disclaimer**

As we said before, *The Office* is not a Christian show. There are some Christians who would find it offensive. At the beginning of each showing, we typically acknowledge this and offer a disclaimer, as well as presenting a case why Christians can watch and engage with this show. Here are our thoughts:

1. The Bible is full of examples where God's servants engage with dominant cultural issues and media. Ezekiel had to build a model of a city under siege to demonstrate God's coming judgment. Haggai had to marry a whore. Jesus used parables from his agricultural Judean setting. Paul quoted pagan poets (Acts 17.28).
2. Christians can take two approaches to culture: withdraw from it or engage with it. Jesus certainly did the latter, getting himself called a "friend of sinners." Mockingbird tends to follow his example.
3. *The Office* is offensive. But so is the Bible. There are sections that are R—or even X—rated. When the Bible shows people doing bad things, it is not holding them up as examples, but as warnings. Much of the crude humor and offensive behavior in *The Office* does the same thing. It is not advocating bad behavior, just depicting it. As Christians, rather than turning our heads away in disgust/judgment, a better response might be to ask, "Why are the people acting this way? What forces in our culture create this behavior? And how might Jesus respond to such people?"

We hope these thoughts will help you answer any criticism you may receive.

Thank you for your interest in TGATTO. We hope and pray you find it fun, thought-provoking, fun, effective, and fun. Did we say fun?

## WEEK 1: IDENTITY

**Intro:** Think back to high school. Painful memories, right? That time is so hard because many of us were asking: Who are we? Who am I? These are important questions, on all of our minds. What is it about me that makes me, me? How am I different? Special? Inferior? Where do I stand? These questions don't ever really go away.

- Identity is often another way of talking about value. Of measuring oneself. Of fortifying oneself against Judgment.

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- What are some of the identities you've tried on in your life? Did you go punk in high school? Artsy for a few months in college?
- **Watch "The Fire" – Season 2, Episode 4:** *A kitchen fire forces the employees to congregate in the parking lot, where Jim suggests a game of 'Desert Island' to pass the time, and the staff learn more about one another than was detailed on their resume.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- What are some of the identities you've tried on in your life?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## Talk

- **Identity in *The Office***
  - Ryan typifies the natural human desire to be more than what people label him. He fears that he will be boxed in and doomed to a two-dimensional existence. Underlying his fear is a desire to escape the mediocrity he sees around him.
    - For example, his co-worker Stanley is the "Crossword Puzzle Guy" while Angela is the crazy "cat woman". Ryan exclaims: "I don't want to have a thing here. I don't want to be the something guy."
    - Michael: his identity as a boss is very important to him. Being seen as the mentor or authority, however ridiculous that might seem. He wants to be "the world's best boss", the number 1. Anyone who might know more about business is a threat. Notice his sensitivity to the fact that he didn't go to college. But he's conflicted: he wants to be the boss, but he also wants to be everyone's buddy.
    - Dwight: a mish-mash. His relationship with Michael is a source of identity, and when he finds it under threat from Ryan, he panics. He also forms a lot of his identity as a would-be tough guy. The volunteer sheriff's deputy schtick.
    - Desert Island game: find our identity in our likes or dislikes. (We also get a great glimpse of how the world views Christians...)

- For most of us, our identity is related to our actions. That is, who we are depends on what we do. Or what we don't do. The number-one cocktail party question: "What do you do?"
- As we know from personal experience and we see in Dwight's jealousy and Ryan's mistake, our identities are fragile. Anything can break our hard earned (and protected) reputations and identities.
- Perhaps you feel that you know who you are, that you're not trying to be someone else. But even those of us whose identities are stable are frequently encouraged to remake ourselves. Look at Billy Ray Cyrus. In 1992 it was acid washed jeans, a mullet, and "Achy-Breaky Heart." Now he's the goatee-wearing cool Hollywood dad of Miley Cyrus. Talk about a reinvention of identity.
- **Gospel Response:**
  - The Gospel response is, in short, that identity games are a dead-end. (See the lonely, deeply alienated life of Don Draper on *Mad Men*, for example)
  - The Bible says that our identity comes from the God who created us. Read Psalm 139:13-14. But we want to define our identity ourselves – play God.
  - Our individual experiences validate how fragile these identities are that we create for ourselves, how easily they can be shaken or how seductive they can become.
  - We need something that is eternal and unshakeable and true. We can only find this if we look to the eternal, immutable God who created us.
    - Philippians 3:4b-9: Paul talks about his identity in his past life. It was all something based on mutable human things. Family, religious labels. But when he became a Christian, all that became rubbish. He now had an identity from God, outside himself and his own particulars. He had a "righteousness from God." In other words, he was loved.

### Large Group Discussion Questions

1. Before I get to my questions, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. What is identity? Is it permanent? Transient?
3. Do Christian people, in your experience, look different from other people? Why or why not? In what way?
4. From tonight's discussion, what is the connection between Christ and a person's identity?

## WEEK 2: MOTIVATION

**Intro:** Introduce the series again. Recap last week – Identity. People running around hurting each other and acting crazy, trying to hold on to their identities.

**This week:** What motivates you? What gets you out of bed in the morning? Why do you do what you do? Important questions.

- The motivation behind our actions often means as much as the actions themselves. For example, when someone calls you to say hello, sometimes they want something from you, other times they genuinely want to know how you're doing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- What are people's motives in giving gifts? Do you have any stories about a gift you received where you questioned the motive? Did you ever give a gift for the "wrong" reason?
- **Watch "Christmas Party" – Season 2, Episode 10:** *Holiday cheer is in short supply when Michael insists on doing a last-minute swap of Secret Santa gifts.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- What are people's motives in giving gifts? Do you have any stories about a gift you received where you questioned the motive? Did you ever give a gift for the "wrong" reason?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## **Talk**

- **Motivation in *The Office***
  - The examples we see in this episode have to do with the giving of gifts. How do people's motivations differ?
    - Toby: part sweetness, part obligation
    - Oscar: pure obligation
    - Dwight: ignorance and judgment, assumes that others will want/need his instruction.
    - Jim: real affection for Pam. He wants to win her.
    - Michael: extremely transparent self-centeredness.
  - The common thread here is self-interest. Some people can hide their selfishness better than others. Michael Scott doesn't seem to be able to do so at all. And that is why he's so funny. He says what other people think.

- **Gospel Response:**

- Self-centeredness is at the heart of human nature. Lives centered around ourselves rather than God. It is universal. The Bible calls it Sin. It is a condition. (Romans 3:10-12).
- Greed, envy, revenge, dishonesty, violence, etc – these things all flow from selfish motivations – are the outward expressions of Sin. (Mark 7:14-23)
- Sin is part of our nature as human beings; it is an inheritance. It is just as impossible for you to choose not to sin as it is for you to choose that your eyes were a different color. As a result, we cannot fix ourselves. It is something from which we need to be saved.
- Jesus is the only person who ever lived whose motivations were pure. He was the only God-centered man. He did the right things for the right reasons. (Romans 5:19)

**Large Group Discussion Questions**

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. Do motives matter? Some people would say it only matters what you do (See atheist Christopher Hitchen's thoughts on the unfairness of God judging people for "thought crimes"). Do you agree?
3. If motives matter, why?
4. Can people ever have pure motives? Have you ever gotten close?
5. Ever seen someone's motives change? What can change people's motives?

### WEEK 3: JUDGMENT

**Intro:** Recap last week. This week - Most of us would agree that “judgment” is a dirty word, something that we want to avoid. But unfortunately, regardless of what you believe or where you’re coming from, Judgment plays an enormous role in all our lives.

- Evaluations, testing, competitions, comparisons, rankings, these are all forms of judgment. Each of us desperately wants to know that we measure up, that we pass the (right) test.
- The Bible often refers to God as a judge. His standards and justice are perfect – He is holy. And he takes into account both our external and internal selves. (Matt 5:17-22).

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- What are the responses to judgment we see in this episode? Where do you experience judgment?
  - **Watch “Performance Review” – Season 2, Episode 8:** *Everyone is nervously awaiting performance reviews from Michael, but his impending conversation with Jan has him raiding the employee suggestion box in order to show off “his” brilliant ideas.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- What are the responses to judgment we see in this episode? Where do you experience judgment?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

### **Talk**

- **Judgment in *The Office***
  - In this episode, judgment comes in the form of a performance review. We see several different approaches:
    - Stanley Hudson: He doesn’t seem to care about the review but goes along “for the bonus”. He is choosing to play a certain role to get what he wants.
    - Angela Martin: She is very confident and welcomes scrutiny because she believes she is able to meet all standards perfectly. She is, however, acutely judgmental of everyone else for failing to be like her.
    - Dwight Schrute: Though Dwight also appears to be very confident, he feels the need to convince others of his worthiness. Dwight is constantly trying to prove himself, fearful that he might lose his standing.
    - Michael Scott: He is desperate to pass Jan’s scrutiny and gain her affection. At the end of the episode, Michael expresses his desire to hear what we all want to hear, that we are good enough. Note that he is not really able to hear the bad. He only hears the good.

- Other types of Judgment: from parents, from society, from OURSELVES. The inner persecutor.
- The fruit of Judgment is the sort of dysfunction we see in the office: delusion, resentment, apathy, etc.
- **Gospel Response**
  - The Bible paints a bleak picture of our ability to meet the God's standards. Rom 7.11 shows that the Law only increases sin; judgment only leads to more acting out. But even when our actions are good, the motivations behind them are always mixed. We can't measure up!
  - The typical human response to God's holiness is either to try harder, hide (like Adam and Eve), or rebel completely.
  - **Discussion of Matt 5 vs. John 10.** In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus upholds the Law to its greatest height. Yet in John he tells the adulteress, "Neither do I condemn you." How can he uphold the Law, yet not apply it? Two theological words/concepts to understand this: Atonement and Justification. (Explain these two ideas.)
    - Atonement: He lived a perfect life. He and only he was able to meet every single standard of God's holiness. And by dying in our place, he counts us as perfect. (Romans 4:25).
    - Imputation: In Jesus we are good enough, not just in one category, but in all categories. God regards us as righteous.
  - Unlike any other religion or system, we are not judged according to our own merits, but according to Jesus'. This is good news!
  - Another Example: The movie *Punch Drunk Love*. Adam Sandler's character is crushed by judgment from all sides, particularly from his 4 sisters. See the scene where he goes to their house for dinner, and ends up destroying the windows. Judgment produces rage and alienation. But when a woman falls in love with him, he changes completely. At the end, he is able to challenge a bully (played by P.S. Hoffman) by saying "I have a love in my life. It makes me stronger than anything you can imagine." Love, not judgment, transforms and frees people.

### Large Group Discussion Questions

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. Why are we drawn to judgment?
3. What do you think of the Christian solution to judgment? Does it make sense?
4. Does your experience with Christians fit with that?

## WEEK 4: FORGIVENESS

**Intro:** Very few things in life are as complicated or interesting or important as how we relate to others – our family, our peers, members of the opposite sex.

- The Bible says that we are made for relationships, both with each other and with God. But our relationship with God is broken as a result of sin, of choosing ourselves over God. (Genesis 3).

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- Name the conflicts: who and over what? Are these legitimate grudges? What is their source? Is there a common thread running through them?
- **Watch “Conflict Resolution” – Season 2, Episode 21:** *Announcing his dissatisfaction with Human Resource’s passive style, Michael insists that he assume responsibility for addressing employee complaints.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- Name the conflicts: who and over what? Are these legitimate grudges? What is their source? Is there a common thread running through them?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## **Talk**

- **Relationships in *The Office***
  - The various members of the office run into a lot of conflicts. The HR department is there to keep a record of wrongs.
  - No one in the office is exempt from conflict. This applies both to friends and enemies. Everyone’s life is filled with “drama” of the good and bad kind. Just because these conflicts normally stay hidden or unexpressed does not mean they do not exist.
    - The Dwight-Jim dynamic is particularly comical because in it, we see an endless cycle of prank and revenge, tit-for-tat. A war almost. No forgiveness.
    - In fact, the whole office runs on a system of desserts. That is, you get what you deserve. Everyone keeps accounts (not just Kevin!).
  - We can all relate: We have our own list of personal hurts and slights. You can probably still remember names you were called in elementary school.
- **Gospel Response:** As the final photo session makes painfully clear, the situation in the office is incredibly messy. Score-keeping (who has hurt us, who we have hurt) seems to be the default human policy. So the people in *The Office*, and we, are in need of redemption in the form of forgiveness.

- Our ability to hurt others is great, as is our ability to hold things against them. Instead of accepting blame (and/or apologizing), we normally give excuses and justifications for our actions.
  - Clip from Ira Glass's intro to the "The Devil in Me" episode of his radio show *This American Life* (Episode 340, originally aired 9/7/08 [http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio\\_Episode.aspx?episode=340](http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?episode=340)). Shows how Glass justifies his own actions, even when he's totally in the wrong.
- This is a result of the Fall. And the result of self-justification is score-keeping. If we're trying to be our own god, we measure our own performance and that of others. Ultimately, the consequence of a broken relationship with God, the creator and sustainer of all life, is death.
- Jesus restores our broken relationship with God through his death and resurrection. We are loved in the midst of our guilt and forgiven. (Romans 5:8) To use Michael Scott's scenarios of conflict resolution, it's a Win-Lose. We "win" (we are forgiven) because God "loses" (gives his life for ours).
- A Definition of Forgiveness is helpful here. It's giving up your right for justice, for redress and instead taking the pain on yourself in some measure. See Bono's description of Karma vs. Grace from the book *Bono in Conversation*. Link to it here: <http://mockingbirdnyc.blogspot.com/2008/01/bono.html>
- Of course, this is not to say that we can no longer hurt others. The eternal consequences of our sin may have been wiped away, but the tangible ones persist. That is, we are still humans, though forgiven ones.
- Still, we can own up to our part in conflicts, knowing that we are ultimately forgiven (by God). More importantly, we can forgive those who've hurt us (regardless of whether or not they ask for it!), i.e., we can do a "Win-Lose," knowing that God forgave us for much worse. (Luke 7:41-43)

### Large Group Discussion Questions

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. Is our society a forgiving one? Why or why not? Examples? (ideas: Bill Clinton, Britney Spears, the response of the Amish community to the schoolhouse murder vs. Columbine, CO)
3. Why do we keep score?
4. What is the result of this? Of withholding forgiveness?
5. Do you agree: knowing you're forgiven enables you to forgive others?

## **WEEK 5: LOVE**

**Intro:** All of us would agree that love is a good thing. It is what we want. The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8,16). We are created in God's image, so we are created to know and experience love. Unfortunately, sin (self-interest) destroys love.

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- What strategies do different people on the show use to get love/attention? Where does this urge come from?
- **Watch "Take Your Daughter to Work Day" – Season 2, Episode 18:** *Life at Dunder-Mifflin becomes even more childish when the staff brings in their kids to learn about the exciting world of the paper business.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- What strategies do different people on the show use to get love/attention? Where does this urge come from?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## **Talk**

- **Love in *The Office***
  - They all want and need love and will go to great lengths to get it:
    - Michael is always trying to force others to love him – shamelessly manipulating situations, misusing his authority, lying about his abilities, etc. Not only do his ploys for love never work, they have the opposite effect.
      - Michael's video reveals how deeply lonely he is. He wants to marry and have 100 kids so he can have 100 friends and never experience the pain of rejection.
    - Others: Pam's gives away candy to win or "buy" the kids' love. A very common strategy. Kelly tries to use manipulation (e.g., her conversation with Stanley) to secure Ryan's love. Stanley's daughter uses childish posturing and flattery to try to attract Ryan.
  - They treat love as a commodity, something to be bargained for, bought, coaxed, or taken. Consequently, just about everything else becomes a commodity in the pursuit of love. There is very little real love in *The Office*.
- **Gospel Response:**
  - Like Michael, we all want real love. But what is that?
  - Real love cannot be manufactured, bought, or leveraged; it is given and received freely. That is its nature. Our everyday experience verifies this.

- You cannot force someone to love you. And even if you could, you wouldn't want it: See Michael's reaction to Toby's question, "Is everything alright?" Michael says, "You're just asking that because you're Human Resources." We don't want love from obligation.
- The most stressful relationships are the ones in which we feel we must do or be something in order to be loved—we want to be loved just because.
  - In this episode, Ryan senses that Kelly doesn't offer "unconditional love." She has demands: marriage and family. And this stresses Ryan out.
- Real love flows from beloved-ness. We love because we have first been loved (1 John 4:19). That is, God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to die for us (John 3:16) God saved us out of love.
- The Bible invites us to experience love, even though we have nothing to bring "to the table" (Isaiah 55:1)
  - See Paul Zahl's *Grace in Practice*, p. 36: Take the perspective of one theologian: "Grace is a love that has nothing to do with you" and following.
- The only chance we have of loving those we find "unloveable" (which we are called to do!) is to realize how deeply we were/are loved in our unloveable-ness.
  - Zahl again, p. 36: "The one-way love of grace is the essence of any lasting transformation that takes place in human experience."
- Another Example: Story of Zaccheus in Luke 19. What did it mean to be a tax-collector? What do you think Zaccheus expected Jesus to tell him? Instead, Jesus wants to go to his house. He honors Zaccheus in a public way, saying, essentially, "I want to be publicly identified with this man." And look at Zaccheus's response! Love begets love. Grace prompts transformation.

### Large Group Discussion Questions

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. Why are the characters on the show initially resistant to the kids' presence in the office? (Opens old wounds, they're not useful, etc.)
3. Is love a choice? Do you want someone to "choose" to love you?
4. If love is based on a choice of free will, what does that say about the future of the relationship?
5. In our human relationships, does earning or deserving have a role in love?
6. What are some examples of making people "work" for love?
7. What is the fear in loving with no strings?
8. Do you agree with Zahl's view that only one-way love transforms people?

## **WEEK 6: GRACE**

**Intro:** Throughout this series, we have heard a lot about the Good News of Christianity, that we are loved by God even though we do not deserve to be. Another word for this kind of one-way love is Grace. Because of Jesus' death on the Cross, God considers us as something wholly different than what we are: perfect (Romans 4:24).

**As you watch...** keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- What causes people to reject Michael in this episode? What are some stories of rejection you can remember from your past (jobs, prom, etc.)?
- **Watch "Email Surveillance" - Season 2, Episode 9:** *Michael decides to read everyone's email and finds out that Jim is having a party and didn't invite his boss. The rest of the episode, Michael tries desperately to get himself invited to the party. He shows up anyway.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions posed earlier:

- What causes people to reject Michael in this episode? What are some stories of rejection you can remember from your past (jobs, prom, etc.)? (Be ready to share one of your own to get the ball rolling)
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## **Talk**

- **Grace in *The Office***
  - When Michael finds out that he is not invited to the party, his desire to be liked/loved by his co-workers drives him to act in all sorts of ridiculous ways, only alienating them further.
    - The more he attempts to force others to like him, the less they like him. One doesn't blame the co-workers for not wanting him at the party or being upset when he arrives.
  - We are just like Michael! We are desperate to know what people think about us, but the truth causes us to despair and to do whatever it takes to change it.
  - At the "lowest" moment of his karaoke routine, Jim (the coolest guy in the office), joins Michael on stage. And he humiliates himself a little too. By doing this, he saves Michael from further embarrassment. And the whole mood of the party changes.
- **Grace in The Bible:**
  - Let's look at a story from the Bible first, and then turn to *The Office* and see how it illustrates a theological principle.

- *Pass out a handout with the story of the Samaritan woman at the well from John 4. Since it's a long passage, we recommend handing out the following excerpt: John 4: 5-9, 16-18, 21-29, 39-41.*
- Discuss the passage:
  - Woman has several strikes against her:
    - Ethnicity: Samaritans were a mixed race, inferior to the Jews
    - Religion: Jews saw Samaritan religion as a corruption of Jewish law.
    - Gender: She was a woman in a patriarchal world
    - Morality: as the passage continues, we see her as a notorious sinner.
  - Yet look how Jesus treats her:
    - He talks to her (note the disciples reaction—further proof that Jesus was “out of bounds” for talking to her). Which means that he considered her a person worthy of respect, which she was not, in that context.
    - He reveals his identity to her in a way that he does with almost no one else in the Gospels.
    - In other words, his behavior towards her is a perfect example of what Christian theologians call **imputation** (see week 3!). He treats her as worthy when she is not. He imputes to her a quality that she does not, on her own, possess.
      - There are many other things we could draw from this passage. But the main point here for our discussion is this idea of imputation.
    - Note also that he never asks her to change her life. But on her own, as a result of the grace Jesus shows, she moves from being a harlot (“slut” would not be too strong a word) to an evangelist.
- **Back to *The Office*:** Imputation is also at work in the interaction between Jim and Michael at the end of the party. Namely, Jim does for Michael what Michael failed to do for himself: he gives him honor, honor that Michael knows he doesn't deserve.
- **What Does This Have To Do With Us?**
  - We have failed at earning God's favor. In fact, we rightly deserve his wrath.
  - Imputation means that God regards you as righteous apart from what you do, past, present, or future.
  - The Bible (and life) demonstrates that God's favor must be bestowed on us from outside. Jesus' death on the Cross (and subsequent resurrection!) achieves this reconciliation. We are redeemed through no action of our own, set free from judgment to love and serve God and man. (Galatians 5:1).

- When we know the freedom given to us through grace, we are changed. From entitled to grateful, from greedy to generous. We are freed to love both God and our neighbor. The more we realize the grace we've been given, the easier we will find it to extend grace to others, especially those that don't deserve it.

### **Large Group Discussion Questions**

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. What would grace look like in human relationships?
3. What would grace look like in church?
4. Has anyone experienced the power of imputation in their own lives from another person?

## WEEK 7: REALITY (AND DENIAL)

**Intro:** Part of what we talked last week about was rejection—how humans reject one another—and about how God does not reject us. The word for this, we said, is grace, God’s one-way love to sinners. We talked about how God does not treat us as we deserve, but rather “imputes” to us something we don’t have: Christ’s righteousness.

- **Segue:** As we close, I want to talk about this same thing, but come at it from a different angle. I want to talk about **denial** and **reality**. Because the first step to receiving God’s grace comes from being given to see things (including yourself) as you really are.
- But this is not always easy! At least, according to The Bible it isn’t:
  - **Ezekiel 12:2** “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not”
  - **Matthew 13:15-16** “For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

**Think about:** Tonight’s episode illustrates how out of touch with reality we can be. As you watch, keep the following question(s) in the back of your mind:

- Where do you see denial in the show? Who is in denial? And what are they in denial about?
- **Watch “Business School” – Season 3, Episode 17:** *Ryan invites Michael to be a guest speaker at his business school. Meanwhile, Dwight battles a bat that gets loose in the office while Pam invites co-workers to her first art show.*

**Small Group Discussion:** Break into small groups of 5-8 for 10 minutes and share your thoughts on the questions we posed earlier:

- Where do you see denial in the show? Who is in denial? And what are they in denial about?
- Invite people to share what was discussed in their group.

## **Talk**

- **Denial and Reality in *The Office***
  - Michael again has a very high view of himself (e.g., Doesn’t care that Kevin almost died). And he constantly fails to see the reality of a situation. In his lecture, he thinks Dunder Mifflin will succeed. Thinks he knows something about business. He is in total denial.
  - Other examples:
    - Jim plays with reality by intentionally deceiving Dwight about being a vampire.

- Pam fails to see that her art is actually not that great. She is also in denial about reality in her relationship with Roy.
- **Gospel Response:**
  - Let's look at what happens with Pam's art.
    - First, the old lady rejected it, then gay guys rejected it, and Roy called it "the prettiest art of all the art" which was really an insult. So she gives up and takes the art down.
    - Then Michael comes in and gushes over her art. Not because it's particularly great, but mostly because he cares about Pam and the office. He likes it because he loves Pam and his Dunder-Mifflin family. Thus the art has much higher quality in his eyes than it normally would.
  - Once her denial ends (and she gives up), Pam is in a position to receive grace. And it transforms the thing she was in denial about!
  - Scripture: *Hand out copies of Prodigal Son parable* (Luke 15.11-32)
    - Key verse: verse 17 says "But when he came to himself..."
      - We all need to have a moment where we come to ourselves.
      - The son in the story is giving up. He sees himself as he is, and he is resigned to his fate. Going home in dishonor. Lost his sonship.
      - But he receives welcome, honor, and love. Totally restored.
  - We saw in *The Office* how Michael, even unintentionally, showed this kind of grace to Pam. It's not a perfect analogy, obviously, but it gives us a glimpse of what grace looks like when denial has been shredded and reality has set in.
    - The order here is important:
      - If Michael had come first and bought the painting right away, it would have confirmed Pam's denial, that her art was a thing of quality. But he came only after her denial had been removed/dismantled.
      - The timing of God's grace is key. We don't see it as grace until we are given to see our dire place of need.
- **What Does This Have To Do With Us?**
  - We are all in some kind of denial.
  - We need to have the veil ripped away so we can see reality. (i.e., we are broken and not getting better on our own.)
  - At this moment, God's grace enters and begins to heal.

**Large Group Discussion Questions**

1. Before we get to some questions I have here, what are your (the group's) thoughts on what we've talked about? Anything resonate with you? What strikes you?
2. What are some examples of denial in our country, culture, and world?
  - a. Role of advertising?
  - b. Role of the church?
3. Where does denial come from? Why do we do it?
4. What are some ways that we "come to ourselves"? What breaks through denial?
  - a. Role of suffering?
5. What are the long-term results of failing to see reality?
6. What is the reality that God wants us to see?