

SERMON TITLE: "Saved by Grace: The Gift of God"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 2:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 21, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Do you know who Jim Gaffigan is? The first time I ever heard of him was in 2015, just before he performed the opening act for the pope's arrival on stage during a visit to Philadelphia. Because Jim Gaffigan is a practicing Catholic who frequently talks about his faith and his church in his stand-up comedy routines, Gaffigan was invited to entertain the gigantic crowd that was eagerly awaiting the pope's appearance.

That was seven years ago, but Jim Gaffigan is still known as a "clean comedian" who rarely, if ever, uses swear words in his routines. In interviews, when asked about his Christian faith, Gaffigan usually replies that he has a clear sense of his need for God's mercy. Gaffigan was raised Catholic, fell away from the church for a while, and then came back to it because he knew he was a sinner in need of God's forgiving love. Gaffigan says that, through the teachings and rituals of the church, he experiences the gift of God's grace.

The gift of God's grace is what I want to talk with you about this morning. Last Sunday, we read from Ephesians chapter one, and learned that we are saved by a "glorious grace" which originates in God's will and desire and is both abundant and lifelong. Today, I invite you to move with me into Ephesians chapter two, where we see this saving grace described as "the gift of God."

1—GRACE IS A GIFT BECAUSE WE DON'T DESERVE IT

This second chapter of Ephesians begins by telling us that God's grace is a gift because we don't deserve it. In case we might mistakenly think we're entitled to or worthy of God's grace, verses 1-3 remind us that we, like the Christians at Ephesus, have been disobedient. We have been dead in our trespasses and sins. Following the course of the world and our own desires, we have aimed ourselves

directly into trouble. Like every other human being on earth, we have sinned and come short of the glory of God. If left to our own devices, we would be facing God's wrath.

Many of us here today have been fortunate to have been raised in Christian families that buffered us from the worst of this human condition and generally steered us in the right direction. That application of grace early in life saved many of us from going too far astray. With regular Sunday school lessons and worship attendance reinforced by the teaching and examples of loving and faithful parents, it's been much easier to abstain from damaging attitudes and behaviors, or at least to have a conscience that recognized when we did do things that were wrong. But even that positive spiritual influence was God's gift of grace, coming before and decreasing the mishaps that otherwise might have resulted from our sinful human nature.

Others of us were less lucky. We grew up in families that didn't practice Christian beliefs and who didn't teach us the ways of Christian living. If you know that my mom is here in the congregation with us every Sunday, you may be surprised to learn that my parents weren't practicing Christians when I was a kid. Fortunately, my mom and dad did eventually give their hearts to Christ and became very faithful Christians. But, when I was in my most formative years, my parents didn't take me to church. They didn't read the Bible or pray with me. They didn't ground me in the strength of faith. They didn't teach me about the loving mercy of God. They didn't persuade me to believe that God had a purpose and calling for my life. To be sure, my parents loved me, and they instilled in me some very important values, but a saving relationship with Jesus Christ was not one of them.

That's why I count myself very blessed that God's gift of grace came to me in another way. When I was in the sixth grade, a school friend invited me to go to church with her. The invitation of 11-year-old Kelly—and the fact that her family picked me up and took me to church with them every Sunday for years—changed the trajectory of my life and had a huge impact on the person that I am today. It's always difficult to imagine what our lives would have been like if we had made different

choices or if our circumstances had been different. But I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't have become a minister of the gospel if I hadn't been the recipient of God's mercy. Without the intervention of God's gift of saving grace, it's entirely possible that sin and disobedience would've had more power in my life, and I might have gotten myself into more complicated and difficult situations.

On our own, we're in a world of hurt. Even when we're trying to do our best, there are so many times when we *know* we've failed or at least *question* if we did the right thing. The challenges of living in an intimate relationship, being a parent, working a job, doing our duty, making ends meet, and getting along in a community all have a way of testing us and showing up our weaknesses. As those vulnerabilities are revealed, we see that it's only by the grace of God that good direction and positive opportunities come to us. It's only by the loving and merciful grace of God that we're lifted out of sin and its consequences. So, it becomes apparent to us that grace is the gift of God, first of all, because we don't deserve it.

2—GRACE IS A GIFT BECAUSE WE CAN'T EARN IT

Fortunately, saving grace isn't dependent on our worthiness. Instead, it comes to us from God's mercy. When Ephesians 2:8 says that grace is "the gift of God," the meaning is quite clear that God's grace is a gift precisely because we can't earn it. This is a shift in emphasis from what we do wrong to what we do right—but even then, our good works still aren't sufficient. Verses 8-10 indicate that this salvation isn't earned compensation for our diligent efforts.

Those of us with a strong work ethic struggle with this concept of getting something for nothing. Ironically, we may even feel guilty about receiving this gift that's supposed to alleviate our guilt. But, as verse eight says, this grace of God doesn't come by our "own doing." We can't boast, as if we personally made it happen by pulling ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps. We didn't earn God's loving mercy in the past, and we aren't earning our keep now. No matter how hard we try or how responsible we are, we won't ever earn our salvation. As we read in these verses, we're saved by the gift of grace.

You probably learned in history or confirmation class about the Protestant Reformation's 16th-century rebellion against the practice of indulgences. The Catholic teaching of that time was that salvation had to be earned—if not by your own personal good works, then by the good works of the saints. Indulgences were a way to purchase saintly credits to your account, so that you'd have enough positive points to merit your salvation. But Martin Luther and his followers read scriptural passages like this one in Ephesians 2, and they knew better. We can't buy or earn our way into God's good graces. Salvation comes to us as the gracious gift of God.

Even when we use the word "gift," we might tend to think of the one-for-another direct exchange of presents between family members or friends, like at Christmas. Or, we might think of an exchange of gifts and services that happens over time, a balancing that may occur over some years. Or maybe we think of a pay-it-forward kind of arrangement. We don't necessarily exchange gifts with the same person; instead, we receive a gift from one and give a gift to another—but still with the idea of keeping things even and fair in society at large. Those kinds of reciprocal gifts are common in our human relationships. But that's not how God works. God's grace is such a great gift that all we can do is bow in humble thanks and receive. God's grace is a gift because we could never, ever earn it.

3—GRACE IS A GIFT BECAUSE IT TRANSFORMS OUR LIVES

In this passage from Ephesians, there's a third and most important reason why grace is a gift. God's grace is a gift because it transforms our lives for the better. Unlike the weird and unwanted gifts we sometimes receive and end up putting in a rummage sale or the trash can, God's grace is a really wonderful and useful benefit. God's grace has the power to rescue and redeem. God's grace has the power to enlighten and encourage. God's grace has the power to restore and enrich.

God's grace may come to us when we're dead in sin and trespasses, but it doesn't leave us there. We may not deserve or be able to earn our salvation, but we certainly can participate in God's good purposes after receiving God's gift of grace. If it feels sad to think about our own spiritual

weakness, we can feel very happy to know that God's merciful love for us has the power to raise us up and make us alive with Christ. This reviving doesn't have to wait until we die and reach heaven. God is already reshaping us in Jesus. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that "we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be *our way of life.*"

While this second chapter of Ephesians makes it clear that we can't save ourselves, the intent is in no way to dampen our spirits or discourage us. Quite the opposite. The point is that God's love is so rich in mercy that God comes to us while we are yet sinners and transforms us into new creatures in Christ. God gives us new life. God reboots us and starts us over, fresh and new. God repurposes us so that we can be useful servants, who will work alongside God in the kingdom of love and mercy. We don't do those works to earn our salvation, but because that's what God has saved us and prepared us to do. God's kindness makes us feel so at one with Christ that we gain a sense of confidence, desire, and purpose to do the work of God, as the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Grace is a gift because it takes us as we are and then transforms us into something better.

CONCLUSION

Later in this worship service, we're going to sing "He Touched Me." That hymn speaks of the transformation that happens when God's gift of grace touches our hearts, cleanses us from sin, and makes us whole. The good news of the gospel is that we don't have to deserve or earn God's grace. It's a gift, freely offered to us, and one that can transform our lives. May everyone worshiping with us today accept and receive this saving grace that comes to us as the gift of God.