

SERMON TITLE: "Saved by Grace: The Calling of Grace"

SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 3:7-8 and 4:1-16

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: August 28, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

During this month of August, we're talking about grace. This glorious gift of God is so foundational to our Christian faith and salvation that you could think of it as a very serious topic. But maybe a little humor will help us too. Listen to this story:

A man dies and goes to heaven. Of course, St. Peter meets him at the pearly gates. St. Peter says, "Here's how it works. You need 100 points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you've done, and I give you a certain number of points for each item, depending on how good it was. When you reach 100 points, you get in."

"Okay," the man says, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

"That's wonderful," says St. Peter, "that's worth three points!"

"Three points?" he says. "Well, I attended church all my life and supported its ministry with my tithe and service."

"Terrific!" says St. Peter, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point? Golly. How about this: I started a soup kitchen in my city and worked in a shelter for homeless veterans."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," St. Peter says.

"TWO POINTS!!" the man cries, "At this rate the only way I get into heaven is by the grace of God!"

"Exactly!" [said St. Peter.] "Come on in!"¹

Grace. We don't deserve it, and we can't earn it. It's a glorious gift from God that has the amazing-grace power to forgive and cleanse us from sin and set us right spiritually. But God doesn't leave us there. The grace of God also has the power to transform our lives and call us to be and do good—like the man who was talking to St. Peter. Today, we're going to focus more on that transformation side of our salvation by grace. Using Ephesians 3 & 4 for our text, let's see how God saves us through the calling of grace.

1—CALLING WITH A PURPOSE

We begin in chapter three, verses seven and eight. Here we see that, through God's gift of grace, we're given a calling with a purpose. The Apostle Paul or, more likely, a follower writing in his

name, tells us that Paul was the recipient of the gift of God's grace. We know from other scriptural passages that God's grace changed Paul's life in radical ways. By his own descriptions and by the accounts others told about him, Paul—formerly called Saul—had been a scary guy. He had been so sure that his Hebrew way of life and beliefs were right that he was willing to participate in violence against those who believed and behaved differently from him. After Jesus' resurrection and the Day of Pentecost, many Jews came to believe in Jesus. As the number of Christian believers was growing rapidly, Saul had the job of hunting down those Christians and subjecting them to punishment and imprisonment. His goal was to deter as many Jews as possible from jumping onto the Jesus bandwagon.

We don't know if this was a job that Saul was recruited and paid to do, or if he was a volunteer. But, fortunately for the Christians, God intervened to stop Saul from his murderous ways. You probably remember that story. Saul was traveling on the Road to Damascus to hunt for Christians, when suddenly a bright light flashed around him and Saul fell to the ground. He heard the voice of Jesus asking him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

Several important things happened after that, but the short version of the story is that Saul, the persecutor of Christians, converted into a Christian himself. This change worked by God's gift of glorious grace was so radical that the church came to know Saul by the new name of Paul. And not only did he become a believer in Jesus, but he also heard the calling of God to become a missionary for Christ. Over and over again in Paul's letters to the churches, he communicated his gratitude that God had not only forgiven him with incredible mercy, but that God had also given him a new calling and a new purpose.

When you read about Paul in Acts and in his letters to the various churches, you get the idea that Paul wasn't the kind of guy who could easily sit still and simply *feel* forgiven. He was a fellow who needed to be *doing*. Part of Paul's saving grace was that God gave him an important job to do. God sent him out all around the Mediterranean region, preaching about Jesus. Sometimes Paul's teaching got him into trouble with the authorities, and he was imprisoned. But even then, Paul had a useful purpose.

He formulated deep thoughts about the Christian faith, and he prayed for and wrote letters to the churches, encouraging them to stay strong, correcting them in their errors, and always reminding them about God's saving grace. Even as Paul was being taken as a prisoner for a trial in Rome, he saw it as God's calling to go there and share the gospel of Jesus with the emperor.

This purpose provided by God's saving grace is available to us too. We may or may not sense God calling us to become missionaries or preachers. But, for sure, God saves us for a purpose. God lifts us out of sin and cleans us off not just to sit on a shelf or be spiritual couch potatoes. God's grace is purposeful. God's grace is calling us to be and do something important. So I challenge you today to consider, what is God is calling you to do? To what important purpose is God's grace calling you?

2—VIRTUES & UNITY OF GRACE

As we move into Ephesians chapter four, we see that the calling of God's grace has some other positive effects that allow us to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called." In verses 1-3, God's saving grace calls us to live "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." These virtues of Christian life aren't just burdensome expectations, like some kind of unfunded mandate. No, God doesn't call us to be or do anything that God doesn't also give us the resources to achieve.

Think again about Paul. Before he became a Christian, he was violent and murderous, as he played the role of a heavy-handed enforcer. That sounds pretty rough around the edges, don't you think? But later, in Ephesians 4, Paul or one of his followers was writing about humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity, and peace. That Paul could even get to this new place of thinking is a miracle of God's grace. Paul certainly didn't make this transformation on his own. Rather, these new traits and characteristics were formed in him by the "the gift of God's grace" which was the "working of God's power" (3:7).

And the saving grace of God can be powerful in *our* lives also. When we hear God's call of grace, we aren't left to our own devices. We aren't stuck in our old ways. God calls us *and empowers us* to become more humble and gentle, more patient and loving, more able to interact with others in unity and peace. According to verses 4-6, our model and ability for these characteristics of unity come from none other than the Holy Trinity, which unites the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father of all. This divine presence that is "above all, through all, and in all" is constantly at work, creating and transforming us so that changes which might have seemed impossible become possible.

As God calls and draws us recipients of grace together in this one body of Christ, we find that our transformation continues. This is possible because of the spiritual gifts given to members of the body. These various gifts are given uniquely to each person in the body of Christ, but we aren't meant to hoard our gifts and keep them to ourselves. Instead, these gifts are meant to be shared with the whole—like that big potluck dinner we've got scheduled for Sunday, September 11, when we kick-off our children's Sunday School and the Choir. It just wouldn't be right if we all kept our best recipes to ourselves. We need to bring out those gifts of God's grace and share them for the nourishment, enjoyment, and building up of the collective body of Christ.

The wonder and power of the body of Christ is that the calling and grace of God gives us so many important abilities. Ephesians 4:11 suggests apostle, prophet, evangelist, and teacher. Today we could add choir singer, Bell Tones ringer, lawn mower, food donator, worship greeter, liturgy reader, weed puller, greeting-card writer, beekeeper, technology provider, sick-list pray-er, offering counter, mission project worker, and more! When we are saved by grace, we are given gifts to share so that we are all built up in faith, knit together in unity, and strengthened to share our ministry of the gospel with others. Our calling to share our gifts of grace with one another helps us all grow in spiritual maturity, so that we will be transformed by grace and make it possible for others to be saved by grace as well. As

the recipients of God's glorious gift of grace, we're called to a purpose and given the resources and power to live new lives worthy of that calling to which we have been called.

CONCLUSION

Since I started this sermon with a joke, maybe it would be good to end it that way too. This is a story about a man who was taken to a Catholic hospital for an emergency surgery many years ago. "The operation went well," and when the man awoke, there was a Catholic nun waiting by his bed. She assured him that he was "going to be just fine." Then the sister went on to inquire how the man intended to pay for his hospital stay.

*"Do you have insurance we can bill?" she asked. "Or can you pay in cash?"
"I'm afraid I can't, Sister," he replied. "The hospital is going to have to extend me some grace."*

*"Do you have any close relatives who could help?" she asked.
The patient replied, "Just my sister in New Mexico, but she's a poor spinster nun."*

The sister at his bedside responded, "Nuns are not spinsters, Mr. Smith. They are married to God."

Then the man said with a smile, "Okay, then call my brother-in-law and ask him to pay the bill."

God's glorious gift of grace may not pay off all our bills. But God's purposeful and transformative calling is absolutely available to us, whenever we're ready to be saved by grace.

¹<https://theturquoisetable.com/gods-great-grace-and-a-joke/>

²Adapted slightly from <https://holyfamilylindale.org/documents/2017/4/Divine%20Mercy%20Sunday%20A.pdf>