

Matthew 7:11, Ephesians 2:4-10

“Saved by Grace”

This past week we celebrated a very special day in the life of our family. Tuesday was Audrey’s 5th birthday. My little girl is five. How did that happen? **(pause)** So of course she had to have presents. What birthday is complete without presents? In our household my wife, Karen, is the chief present hunter. This year she knocked it out of the park for Audrey’s birthday. Audrey loves her pretty costume jewelry. Audrey loves princesses, ballet, horses and of course unicorns. So for Audrey’s birthday Karen found a jewelry box about **(use hand motions)** yea... big. When the top is opened it’s a music box with a little ballerina that turns. Painted on the outside of the jewelry box are a princess, a unicorn and castle. Audrey was so surprised and excited. Karen really nailed it for Audrey’s birthday with this gift. **(pause)** All of this has me thinking about our first Scripture this morning.

Matthew 7:11

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?”

Okay. So I am not going to stand up here and brag about how good Karen and I are at being parents. We are not perfect parents. We do our best all the time. **(pause)** And we mess up all the time. **(pause)** The thing is if Karen can hit the mark so well with this jewelry box, and I really think she did, then how much better are the gifts given to us by God? **(pause)** The Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians,

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Ephesians 2:4-5).

The gift Christ offers to us is salvation. **(pause)** Without a doubt salvation is a much better gift than a jewelry box. But there might be some here who do not think so. There might be some here who think, “Why do I need to be saved? What’s so wrong with me? Where is the danger?” **(pause)** To this concern I would answer we all have something from which we need to be saved. While there is always the terror of hellfire and eternal damnation there is the more pressing need of freedom from sin and death today. Sin is anything which separates us from the love of God and causes us daily misery. Maybe you don’t feel miserable. That could be because you don’t have anything to compare your current life to. If the light of God’s love has not shone abroad in our lives then we might as well still be asleep under our covers. We might as well be asleep with the blinds closed, the curtains drawn and hiding under our covers. Those who have never experienced the love of God are like children hiding in their jammies for fear of the first day of school in the fall. They are like people who have never sat on the beach and had to squint for brightness. They are people who have never stood on an overlook of the Blue Ridge Parkway and felt both the summer heat and the cool breeze blowing through the canyons. They are like people who cannot imagine what it is to look down into their newborn baby’s eyes for the first time. If they have nothing to compare it to of course people cannot comprehend that they are in misery, or even that they are in any trouble.

Into this situation God offers God’s gift. At first God offers God’s preventing grace. God’s preventing or prevenient grace is a first wish to please God. It is a first inkling or idea that there is something better or more wondrous than the life we are living now.¹ Prevenient grace cannot be bought, or earned. As a matter of fact,

¹ Wesley, John, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” II.1. John Wesley’s Sermons, an Anthology. Edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 488.

if we have started wondering about God and would like to either know more about God or to be a little closer to God then it is proof God has already started to work in our lives. God always works first. We can go along like this for a while. Then comes a very strong desire to be close to God. We are going to try to get close to God on our own. We are going to try and do it on our own for a while. (pause) I am just gonna tell ya, this part can be frustrating. (pause) This part can be **REALLY** frustrating. This part can be frustrating because we have to discover for ourselves that we cannot earn what God offers. We don't deserve it. No one is good enough; No one! No one is smart enough, or pretty enough, or rich enough, or powerful enough to deserve the gift God offers. (pause) If we were to receive our fair share of what we have coming to us for our behavior alone the penalty would likely be something more like what Christ experienced on the cross than the paradise we imagine. When we die there is no bargaining or negotiating with God. Either we have accepted God's grace or we haven't. That's it.

After we have finally realized for ourselves we cannot earn grace God allows us to sit with that for a while. John and Charles Wesley both struggled with this period in their experience of salvation. (pause) For the Wesley boys the waiting was terrible. (pause) Then it happened. First to Charles Wesley on May 21, 1738, and then to John Wesley on May 24, 1738.² Charles described it as a palpitation of the heart. John said he felt his heart strangely warmed. For both of these men the salvation they experienced came with a living faith which, "works by love and is necessarily productive of all good works and all holiness."³ In this moment when Charles and John Wesley felt a change of heart they experienced what we call both justifying and the beginning of sanctifying grace. Justifying grace is instantaneous. It happens right away. Justifying grace is like having every sin you have ever committed written out in room full of black boards, and then Christ comes with a bucket of water and a big rag and washes the black boards clean. When we are justified we are saved from the guilt of sin and returned to a favorable position with God.⁴ Sanctifying grace weans us off from the power and the root of sin.⁵ If prevenient grace leads us to the cross then sanctifying grace leads us away from our sinful habits, opinions and preferences, and into a deep abiding love with God. It is one thing to be forgiven it is something else to go and sin no more. We have these habits, and temptations which trip us up. Sanctifying grace works to free us from those temptations until we reach entire sanctification. Entire sanctification is a state of being in this life when we are no longer tempted to put distance between us and God.

God may be the greatest gift giver – every. We don't have to wait for our birthday; we don't have to wait for Sunday, and we shouldn't wait until we are on our death bed. God offers us the gift of life and abundant life today, not tomorrow, not after lunch, today, right here and right now. All that is required is that we say, "yes." All we have to do is say, "yes," to God's love, to say, "yes," to God's free gift of grace, and say, "yes," to God's authority over our lives. It isn't about following all 644 rules in the Old Testament. Being a Christian is about loving God first and foremost above E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G. When we love God first we show that love by the way we treat others. John and Charles Wesley wanted a living faith which produced good and fruitful works within them. If we are really saved by God's grace it will show in the way we show love for others. Take a moment – just a moment and close your eyes. Who are the people you can't possibly love? Who are the people you cannot possibly forgive? Who are the people you think are freeloading on our country's resources? (pause) Who are the people God is putting on your heart to serve?... If they are the same people you can't stand, and we refuse to serve them as we would serve God then the state of our salvation is in question. God

² Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville 2003) 86-87.

³ Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, (Abingdon Press: Nashville 2003) 86.

⁴ Wesley, John, "Justification by Faith," II.3. *John Wesley's Sermons, an Anthology*. Edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 114.

⁵ Wesley, John, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," II.1. *John Wesley's Sermons, an Anthology*. Edited by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 488.

doesn't take our salvation away. God does not take salvation away. However, once we are saved we are not always saved. **(pause)** We can choose to walk away from God's gift of saving grace. Through sanctifying grace we grow closer to God. Through our stubborn, stiff-necked selfishness we walk away from God's love for E-V-E-R-Y-O-N-E. My sisters and brothers, is there a living, breathing, fruit bearing faith within you? Are we as a church living into God's saving grace by sharing God's love with the people inside these walls and outside these walls? **(pause)** The answer we come up with determines just how long our church will be around.

In the name of Jesus Christ,

Amen.