

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Lent 4

March 14, 2021

Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran

Because he loves us

— Ephesians 2:4-10

Do you like free stuff? I personally don't. Let me explain why. We see that word FREE in all caps, huge font, all over the place: "FREE FRENCH FRIES* with \$10 purchase." Ah, there's a catch! Or you get emails the word "FREE" in the subject line—Come on down to our store this weekend and the first 200 customers receive a free gift worth \$100." Ah, it's free, but it's limited. Or this one really bugs me: "FREE trial subscription... sign up for a no-obligations 30-day trial." Ah But that's how they get you... You have to give your credit card number and they make it so easy to sign up, but they are counting on you forgetting to cancel that free trial subscription. Or sometimes you get something for free, but you get what you pay for. It's free, but it's cheap and inadequate. We can be very skeptical when we hear the word "free" because after all, nothing is really free. And that's our problem when it comes to truly grasping the concept of God's grace for us sinners.

As we look at our lesson from Ephesians 2, there's a word, or concept that jumps off the page—FREE. Salvation from sin, new life and restored relationship with God, are free gift to you. It is by grace you have been saved. By grace. Grace is the free gift of God's undeserved love. Salvation by grace is the most essential, the most beautiful teaching in the Bible. It's also the most offensive teaching in the Bible. The teaching of salvation by grace alone, through faith and not by works, offends every fiber of our sinful nature and our human reason.

It's not so much that we don't like things that are free, it's that we really like to earn things. "I don't want a hand out. I don't need help. I want to work for it. I want to earn it." You and I know better than that when it comes to salvation. A number of us can even recite that part of our sermon text for today; ***"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*** But, by nature we like to boast, at least internally. We like to hang our hats on our own achievements. We make humble brags—modest references to things we've done—in hopes that someone will pat us on the back, or maybe God should even pat us on the back for trying. That attitude also comes in this way: when you are confronted with your own faults and failure, where do you turn to for comfort? Do you look for faults in others?

That attitude that we have to earn or deserve God's favor is so deeply engrained in us. That way of thinking has to die before we do. We don't work for God's grace otherwise it wouldn't be grace. If I function on the basis that "I'm doing good, I'm trying, I'm at least doing something so that God will love me more..." then I'm insisting God to give me what I deserve. The verse right before our lesson puts that into perspective for us—***All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.*** That is what we deserve and when we realize that, all boasting is silenced. Now we wonder, "Why?" Why then, does God forgive me? How could God forgive me? Because he loves us. ***"...we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."***

One of the major hang-ups with free stuff is the fear that it's cheap or inadequate. Well God's free isn't cheap. God's grace isn't chintzy. God's free and faithful love for you cost him his life. ***God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*** It's one thing to say, "I love you." But God's love is more than just words. It's more than just a feeling. It's an action. You and I were dead in sin, objects of God's wrath by nature. And what did God do? He gave his one and only Son. You are not saved by your works. You are saved by the works of Christ. You don't get right with God by the merit system, but you are saved through the merits of Jesus Christ. You are saved from the wrath of God, because Jesus took upon himself the full brunt of God's wrath on his cross. You were dead, but you were made alive in Christ who died for you. Why, did God do that for us? Because he loves us.

Well why does God love us? Sometimes we wonder how God could love us again and again because our sin is great. We have difficulty fully grasping God's love because our understanding of love is limited. It's easy to love those who love us. We are willing to invest love into a relationship but we expect a return on our investment. God's love for you is greater than your sin. His love isn't tied to your actions or efforts. His love isn't tied to your own personal sense of self worth. God's love for you is tied to Jesus. In Jesus Christ is the fullness of God. In Jesus is the fullness of God's love. And you are connected with Christ. You are in Christ. Just look how Paul emphasize that connection to Christ: ***God made you alive with Christ. God raised us up with Christ and***

seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

In Christ Jesus. You are in Christ. You are connected with Christ. Today we get to see three baptisms. Remember your baptism where God washed away your sin and there he connected you with Christ. He brought you from death to life. He made you his own child and raised you up with Christ. You are in Christ. At times you feel that you have hidden your face in shame from God. But in Christ you are hidden in Christ. God looks at you and he doesn't see those sins you regret. He sees Christ's perfect life credited to you. In Christ and at your baptism God said to you personally, "I love, you are my child. With you I am pleased," without you lifting a finger. That's grace. That is God's free love and mercy in Christ. And you are in Christ.

"It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast." You can't boast and brag, but you can glorify and praise. The very next verse points that out, ***"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*** God actually created us to work. Adam and Eve, before the fall, worked the garden, not as slaves, but in joy as the crown of God's creation, in total freedom. In Christ we are new creations. The attitude of working because "I have to please God" is put to death. A new attitude is brought to life. I live for Christ because I want to. Why, because he loves me and gave his life for me.

What are some of the good works that God has prepared for you? We think of work sometimes as merely tasks— Things to do. And even some of the most menial tasks are works that God gives us to do. But rather, the opportunities God gives us are not things to do but people to love. God places in front of you people that simply need to be loved. They need to be loved not because they reciprocate that love (if they do, it's a bonus). They need to be loved not because they prove that they are inherently loveable. They need to be loved as Jesus has loved you—by grace and not by works. Think of the impact that has when you love your spouse because Jesus loves you. Think of the impression you make on a child when you love them not based on their obedience, but you love them because Jesus loves you. Think of the difference it makes in this world when you respond in love to someone who has let you down, hurt you, demeaned you—you don't deal tit for tat. You love based on grace not by merit.

When you love people like that, they might be shocked. "Why are you doing this for me?" You can answer why. Tell them about the love you know. A love that is full and free, no strings attached. A love found only in Jesus. That's why. Because he loves us. Amen