

Good morning! This is Sunny Ahn, the Senior Pastor at Kona United Methodist Church. I am glad that you are with us this morning. Let me start today's message with a short story.

**[Story]** A woman suffered her husband's loud, rancid, and long-winded morning farts long enough. She warned him on multiple occasions that he's going to fart his guts out one day. With thanksgiving approaching, she hatched a plan. She woke up early in the morning on the Thanksgiving Day to prepare for that night's dinner. After cleaning the turkey, she took the intestines and slipped them into her sleeping husband's boxers. A few hours pass and she hears a loud yell followed by footsteps around the room upstairs. After a period of what sounded like grunting, her husband finally creeps down the steps, as pale as a ghost. She asks if he's okay and he responded, "honey, you were right and I should have listened to you. It actually happened. But by the grace of God and two fingers, I got them all back in."

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Grace, the Free Gift from God! That's the one we will talk about today. We talk oftentimes as though we understand the term. The bank gives us a grace period. The seedy politician falls from grace. Musicians speak of a grace note. We describe an actress as gracious, a dancer as graceful. We use the word for hospitals, baby girls, kings, and pre-meal prayers. We talk as though we know what grace means.

Whenever I think of grace, I think of the Disney movie "Sleeping Beauty." A princess is cursed into a deep sleep and nothing can wake her up but a kiss from the prince. Let's imagine that you're the princess and you've been awakened from a deep sleep. It's a huge story. All the news medias want an interview, and the first question they ask is, "What did you do to break the curse?"

What would you say? You couldn't say, "Well, I just thought about it and decided, 'It's time to wake up!'" You couldn't say, "Well, I just claimed the victory for myself." You also couldn't say, "I asked the prince to come and he came." You couldn't say any of that, right? You were asleep! You were cursed! So, what would you say? You'd say, "I didn't break the curse. The prince did."

That's what Paul is saying exactly in today's scripture, Ephesians 2:8-10. How did we break the curse of sin? We didn't. God did in Christ. It was the Prince's kiss. But we were not a sleeping beauty. We were a lifeless corpse. God had to make us alive, not just wake us up. That's the grace, the free gift from God we are talking about.

In verse 8 of today's scripture, you may notice two familiar words in one sentence—grace and faith. It says, “By grace you have been saved through faith.” We are saved by grace through faith.

Grace, *by definition*, is unmerited favor. Grace is God's kind disposition toward sinful people who cannot get their act together, who cannot obey, and who cannot find their way to God. Grace is God's consistent provision for God's people who cannot provide for themselves. Grace is God's activity of good to those whose activity is bad. Grace is what we're saved *by*.

Now, let's talk about faith. If grace is the basis of salvation, faith is the instrument of salvation. Faith is what lays hold of grace. It's the hand that reaches out and grabs. It's the proof that grace has come.

The book of Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” So, faith is forward looking. Our future hope creates today's faith. Faith is the rock-solid surety of God's promises based on God's character. It's looking to God and trusting that God's grace is sufficient to save because it always has been. It's believing that God has never once failed one man or woman who has trusted God, and God is not going to start with me.

Now, let's look at the last phrase of verse 8. It says, “And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” What Paul is saying here is, and also it's what the entire New Testament says, *the totality of our salvation—by grace through faith—is God's gift, FREE GIFT!* The prime mover in our relationship to God is God. Nothing in us compels God to save us. God saves us because God wants to save us.

The whole New Testament tells us human beings are profoundly messed up. That's not a popular message for us today, isn't it? But, I believe it, not just because the Bible says so, but because it matches pretty much my whole life of experience on this earth.

The human race is screwy. We're born with what amounts to a death wish. We engage in all manner of counterproductive deeds and attitudes guaranteed to hurt ourselves and others, from overeating to drug abuse to gossip to murder to tantrums to lying to promiscuity to narcissism—the list is endless.

Yes, I recognize we also perform praise-worthy deeds. No, we're not completely bad. There is good in our hearts, too. But, we're bad enough that, if we happen to be encumbered by a conscience, we labor through much of our life battling regret and self-loathing. If we also happen to believe in a holy God, we fear His wrath, because we're unholy messes.

Paradoxically, pursuing religion and trying to keep its rules does nothing to lift our burden, does it? The more religious we become, the more we're reminded of how short we fall. Rather than helping us feel better, religion—by which I mean the rule-oriented, condemnatory type—leaves us feeling even guiltier and less adequate than if we had no faith at all.

Holiness just is not a condition we can achieve by our own efforts. That's why Jesus plainly despised legalistic religious people. He said they heaped anguish on people by burdening them down with ever more rules, which only led to ever more guilt, while they themselves were unable to obey their own laws.

By contrast, Jesus said, He came to reverse that process. He proclaimed “the favorable year of the Lord, Jubilee”—God's unqualified forgiveness, mercy and love toward adulterers, prostitutes, crooked tax collectors, lepers and miscreants of every stripe.

For Him, it was almost as if the worse you'd been, the better off you suddenly were. If you were a sinner, and knew you were a sinner, and were sorry you were a sinner, but were unable to do anything to help yourself, Jesus gave you a free pass from God, a one-way ticket straight into heaven.

On the other hand, if you continued to be a finger-wagging prig, condemning other sinners while pretending you were holy, you were likely to split hell wide open. There was no hope for you because you were refusing the only real hope—grace. Jesus and His followers called His message the Good News. Because grace is very, very good news for everyone, except for those self-righteous people finger-pointing others and condemning others.

Grace says everybody needs help. Grace says all people need the Lord. God's grace is for everyone...for those who believe "Black Lives Matter" and also for those who believe "All Lives Matter!" God's grace is for all color of people—white, black, brown, whatever color of skin we have or not—we need God's grace. God's grace for all people—men, women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex....All people need the Lord, and God's grace is for everyone, including democrats and republicans!

We all need forgiveness from God and from the people we've inevitably injured through our stupidity and malice. Grace says that God's love and favor have nothing to do with our individual perfection or imperfection. Instead, we can enjoy a wonderful relationship with the Lord and receive blessings from God because of who God is, not because of who we are.

God simply gives us gifts, FREE GIFT—Grace! Let us be graceful to ourselves and each other in our speech and in our doing because of the God of grace whom we believe...and from whom the free gift, grace, we have received. Amen.