

I'm guessing most of us, if not all of us, have heard the phrase being nickeled and dimed to death? In our money driven and cash grabbing society this problem is huge and getting worse. Hidden fees seem to be everywhere, not the least of which is when we travel. Comparison shopping for a hotel room, for example, is nearly impossible. The one with the advertised bargain price may very well charge for amenities we've come to expect to be included: a dollar or two to store your suitcases after your checkout; \$10-\$25 for use of the Internet from your room, or a fee of approximately \$8 to print your boarding pass before you leave for the airport.

Spend a few minutes shopping for just about anything online, and you will quickly learn to look for the hidden fees. The vendor that appears to have the best price for the item you want, may very well be charging excessive shipping and handling fees, making the final cost of purchasing from them the most expensive of all. As the old adage says, if something appears too good to be true, it probably is.

So when a price is *too* low, we begin to search everywhere for the hidden fees. We look for the fine print. We don't like being nickel and dimed to death. We've learned to negotiate – we call ahead to avoid the fees, or to make them go away. Why? Because nickels and dimes quickly add up, and, before long, we end up paying far more than we had bargained for.

This is why, when we come upon today's second lesson from Ephesians, many tend to engage their scam-radar. Is this another shiny sales pitch hiding some nickel and dime hidden fees that will hurt us later? This seems too good to be true. Our sins are forgiven. We are renewed and restored. We, who were once dead, receive a new life.

This sounds like too much mercy. This sounds like too much grace. Could it be that God is mercy-ing and gracing us to life? And here's the frosting on the

salvation cake that is available to everyone: All of this comes to us for free. There's nothing we need to do, no hoops to jump through, no hidden costs. This all sounds too good to be true doesn't it? Perhaps we need to take a closer look at the fine print. Let's look a little more closely at our text this morning.

If you're of a certain age, you probably remember an inventor named Ron Popeil and his pervasive television commercials. His company, Ronco, sold amazing products including the Pocket Fisherman, and the Chop-O-Matic. Ronco became a multimillion-dollar enterprise not only on the strength of Popeil's inventions, but also because he was an amazing salesman pioneering the infomercial to sell his products to the masses. Popeil popularized advertising standards such as, "How much would you pay?" and "But wait! There's more!," techniques that are still being used.

Today's passage from Ephesians begins like a Ronco sales pitch. We're reminded of just how difficult life can be. You were dead, Paul writes to the church at Ephesus and to us, through your sins. You've been disobedient to the ways of God. You followed your own desires. And where did all of that get you? The same place it leads everyone else – nowhere. You can almost see the exasperated person portrayed in the television commercial and the voice of the announcer saying, "Have you ever tried to ...?" The actress has disheveled hair and an annoyed expression on her face. She knows it's going to be a long, difficult and, ultimately, unsuccessful day.

Paul then goes on to point out all the places where the church of Ephesus has tried to find the better way on their own. They have "lived ... in the passions of [their] flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses" and found them empty. We know what that's like right? We, too, have chased after money, position, and power, only to find when we've acquired them, that they aren't always what we expected. We aren't as satisfied as we had hoped to be.

We shop for vacations, finding all of those nickel and dime fees and getting the rock-bottom, best price. We search for amazing deals on new cars, computers, and other things we want. But we find that seeking after the passions of our flesh, and the desires of our senses satisfies us only for a moment. The vacation will come to an end in a couple of weeks. The new-car smell will not last long, and the new models with updated amenities will be out before we know it. Before long, we find ourselves shopping for the next great thing. Without help, we become stuck in a never-ending cycle of pursuing things we believe will make us whole and happy but somehow fall short.

Again, you can probably picture certain scenes you witnessed in infomercials over the years. Especially the ones where the actor or pitchman, declares something like, "Tired of doing things this way, luckily for you there is a solution." Well this morning, the Apostle Paul offers a solution to us as well. - There's a new life which will deeply satisfy, and it's available to us. - We were once dead, but we can be made truly alive. - We've been struggling; there is one who will save us. - We have been poor; there are better riches available to us.

"What would you pay," the deep-voiced actor of the infomercial would continue, "to break the cycle of disappointment, to be raised up with Jesus, to be made alive with him and to be seated with him in glory?" The biblical answer, of course, is nothing. The price has already been paid; the work has been done. God is not in the business of nickel and diming us to death. Instead, we are being mercy-ed and graced to life.

We hear these words today, however, and perhaps our scam radar goes off. We're cynical. We've been trained to be skeptical. We've been taught there's no such thing as a free lunch. We've learned from experience that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. We've been victims of corporate greed, commissioned

salespeople, and fine print. We don't want to get taken. So we wonder what God is really after from us. What will it really cost us?

If we keep reading, however, we learn that today's passage isn't a sales pitch. God isn't trying to boost his numbers and get rich off of us. This isn't about him at all. This is not a business transaction. Paul writes, instead, that God is doing all this, "out of the great love with which he loved us." This is a gift, given to us with no strings attached. This is an act of love from God, and God's love changes everything!

As we seek out the fine print in this passage, all we find is love, God's love for each and every one of us. God isn't asking us to purchase a new and improved product, to buy into a program, or to accept a philosophy. God is asking us to accept the love we've already been given. It's already available to us. We simply need to live into it! In fact, Paul goes on to write that not only do we not need to buy in, we can't. We cannot earn it through something we give. We do not deserve it because of something we've done. It's a gift given to us through the grace of God and the mercy of Jesus Christ.

When we look for the fine print, we notice this passage is in the past tense -- God "made us alive, you have been saved," and God has "raised us up with him." All of this has already been done for us. Our task is not to do something to earn this amazing new life, but rather to live into this new, more satisfying life that we have already been given.

There is a story told of an American who went over to Paris, and, wishing to buy his wife a little gift, purchased a phosphorescent, mother-of-pearl match-box container; and the beauty of it was that in the dark it was said to radiate a wonderful light. He packed it in his trunk, took it home to the U.S., and at a family welcome home dinner he asked for the lights to be put out.

In the dark he took the match-box container from his pocket to present it to his wife, but, when he looked at it, it was as black as the darkness surrounding them. Afterwards in disappointment he declared, "I've been swindled! This souvenir must be something they palm off on foreigners.

The next day his wife, a bit curious about the little gift that was given to her, discovered on the box a few words in French. She took it to some friends who had a French maid and had it translated. That night, in the darkness, it was all aglow, for she had followed the instructions written on the box, which said: "If you keep me all day long in the sunlight, I will shine for you all night long in the darkness." The same can be said of us as well. When we spend time basking in the light of Christ, when we seek to follow him, as we live our lives according to His divine purpose we begin to radiate and glow for those that surround us that may still be in the dark.

Paul concludes: "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." God is calling us to a new way of living. God is not asking us to earn something, but, rather, to receive something. We've been exasperated by the cycle of seeking ways of living that are satisfying. Try as we might, all of our efforts fall short. We've bought into the old way of living -- chasing the desires of the flesh and senses -- and have found them lacking.

There's a better way, but we don't have to purchase it! In fact, it isn't for sale. It's a gift we've already received. To get the life we want from it, we need to live into it. We're used to getting nickel and dimed to death by salespeople and corporations. In Christ, however, we're being mercy-ed and graced to life by our loving God. May we accept the great gift of his love by living into the life of faith which is readily available and already ours. Amen.