

Sola Gratia: Grace Alone



Ephesians 2:1-10

Justin Deeter – October 15, 2017

As the month of October progresses, we continue in our series commemorating and reclaiming the legacy of the Protestant Reformation on its 500th anniversary. Each Sunday we are taking one of the five mottos of the reformation and unpacking those truths from Scripture. So far we've considered sola scriptura (Scripture alone) and sola fide (faith alone), today we look at sola gratis (grace alone). However, before we launch into a discussion of God's scandalous grace, I thought it might be best to share some of my own biographical background, in how these truths have shaped me.

My father was a southern baptist pastor. Each Sunday I was exposed to the Gospel, though it took me a while to understand it. I made a profession of faith and was baptized at a young age, though my faith was infantile. However, a difficult family transition occurred in middle school. With two quick moves back to back, I struggled with anger and bitterness. In vivid detail, I was confronted with my own sinfulness. However, it was also at this time that the full weight of God's grace in the gospel began to land on my heart. Listening to my father

preach God's grace and seeing his life model that grace, the Spirit deepened my understanding of my need for God's grace alone.

Over the years, I had heard my father mention Martin Luther, the German monk who started the Reformation, with great appreciation over the years. He had taken a course on Martin Luther in seminary, and always spoke of him fondly. At my school, not only did we have a Science Fair project, but we also had a History day project. The History day project was very much like a Science Fair project, except with history. It involved putting data and summary onto a giant piece of cardboard and presenting on an event in history. After wrestling with what to do, I decided I would do my history day project on Martin Luther. With the help of my mother, who served as my creative engineer, we fashioned my piece of cardboard into the shape of the door of the church of Wittenberg and we nailed the 95 theses into it.

During college and as my faith matured, these truths of the Reformation, particularly God's grace, began to greatly shape me. I began to read more about the reformers and the Puritans, and their writings captivated me. Increasingly aware of my own sinfulness, my dependency on God's grace alone grew stronger. As I looked around much of the evangelical culture I witnessed church's that idolized tradition, promoted legalism and moralism, and overall looked like a bunch of hollow Pharisees simply going through the routine of religious practice.

As I began serving on staff at a church in Charleston, South Carolina at 18 years old, I realized just how many nice, church going people had become gospel proof. Over the decades, they've become so numb to the gospel, that the grace of Jesus had failed to captivate their hearts.

It was during this time, I preached my first Sunday morning sermon on the grace of God, from the very same passage I plan to preach to you today, Ephesians 2:1-10. Only God's radical grace can make dead hearts alive. Only the scandal of grace can awaken the slumbering souls in the church. As we consider sola gratia (grace alone) this morning, I pray you will be captivated by this truth: Dead sinners like us are made alive by God's grace alone.

1. In Need of God's grace: Dead in Sin (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Before we can understand the scandal of God's radical grace, we must first understand our need for grace. You won't be amazed at God's love and grace towards you, if you have no knowledge of yourself. Looking into our hearts can be a frightful thing, because we do not like what we find. In general, most people turn a blind eye to their own wretchedness. Through comparison with others, we lie to ourselves, convincing ourselves that we are pretty good people—well, at least not as bad as that other guy. Through this deluded

rationalization we justify ourselves, thinking that we have no need for grace, because we do not *need* saving. No wonder then why the message of the Gospel of grace fails to grip our hearts! We have no grief over sin, no shame over our shortcomings, no sorrow over our wickedness! I think J. I. Packer sums it up accurately when he said,

“We have seen why the thought of grace means so little to some church people- namely, because they do not share the beliefs about God and man which it presupposes.”

To know God’s grace, we must first know ourselves. We need the Spirit, through God’s Word, to show us who we really are. This is why the opening of Ephesians 2 is so important. It’s brutally honest—heart wrenching even.

However, before we get to the good news, we must first hear the bad. Before we can comprehend the glory of grace, we must first understand the wretchedness of sin. Before we can be made alive in Christ, we must first acknowledge that we are dead in sin.

Notice what the text says, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins.” By dead, it means you have no life. You don’t have an ounce of spiritual power to save yourself. Dead people are powerless to make themselves alive again. I’ve watched many a man die, and I’ve stood over many caskets, and not one of them could make themselves alive. We are born into a state of spiritual deadness, gripped by sin.

Those dead in sin, have followed the subtle lies of the “prince of the power of the air,” that being Satan. The demonic lies of the kingdom of darkness have captivated our attention, working in our wicked hearts. Everyone before Christ, lived in this state of deadness and rebellion against God. We followed our passions and indulged very carnal desire.

What do our rebellious hearts earn us? Condemnation. “We were by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” This means that our human nature isn’t naturally good, but naturally depraved. From birth, we are prone to wickedness, selfishness, and idolatry. Laced with pride, we live for ourselves and reject the plain truth about God evident in the cosmos. Because of our rebellion, we rightly deserve God’s judgment and wrath.

These ideas are not popular in our world today. No one enjoys hearing about their own wretchedness. However, we must come to terms with reality. The word of God helps us to see the truth about ourselves. If we truly look into the depth of our hearts, we would find that no good thing dwells within us. Even the good things we do are laced with sinful motivations. Until the Spirit convicts you of your sinfulness, you will not be amazed at God’s grace. Jesus will leave you unimpressed and the piercing truth of the Gospel will bounce off your heavily armored heart, failing to penetrate your shield of delusions.

The summary of life apart from Christ is bleak: we are dead sinners who follow the kingdom of darkness and indulge in the passions of our flesh. Therefore, we, by our very nature are children of wrath. No matter how bleak the truth, it is the truth nonetheless. Only by acknowledging who we are does the beauty of grace captivate our hearts.

2. Saved By God's grace: Made Alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-9)

The bitter news of our own depravity shifts in verse four with the all-important conjunction, "but." We were dead sinners and deserving of wrath, **but** God did something about it.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:4-7, ESV)

This incredibly good news warms our hearts after we've just looked into the coldness of who we are. We were helpless and dead, but God did what we could not do for ourselves! In his great mercy and love, he takes us "even though we were dead in our trespasses" and he resurrects us. He makes us alive in Christ!



You see, sola gratia (grace alone) means that God alone takes the initiative in our salvation. He intervenes and helps us in our condemnation. He saves us though we don't deserve to be saved. He redeems us though he has no obligation to redeem us. He loves us though we are not worthy to be loved. Yet, "even though we were dead in our trespasses" God makes us alive together with Christ, and has "seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

Paul makes it crystal clear for us starting in verse 8:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

(Ephesians 2:8-9, ESV)

We are saved by grace alone, and we receive that grace through faith alone. In Christ, all the blessings of our salvation are won for us. Motivated by his love for sinner, Jesus endures the harsh work of the cross. With every pierced nail, mocking cry, and gurgling breath, he suffered for us. "This is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

In order to receive salvation, we must admit we cannot earn it. We must repent of our works. No one gets into to heaven by their good deeds. It is only by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.

You see, this is what the Reformers began to discover. The Catholic Church believed salvation was by grace, but it required your participation in the



sacraments in order to receive that grace. Thus, you were saved by cooperating with God. However, as the reformers understood it, this began to appear like a salvation by works type of system. In order to receive grace, I had to do something. As the reformers recovered the Scriptures, they began to discover that the Gospel is far more radical than they were taught to believe. God saves us by his grace alone. As Martin Luther said, "He who does not receive salvation purely through grace, independently of all good works, certainly will never secure it."

People today still try to earn salvation through their good works. They try to be good moral people, hoping that will make them right before God. They will even be good church going people, regularly putting in something in the offering plate and showing up every Sunday. Yet, such works are futile when it comes to our own salvation. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. The scandal of God's grace is that he takes depraved people like us and makes us his children. He takes the unworthy and makes them worthy, the unjust and makes them just. Grace shuts up any attempt to religious pride and performance. Knowing that we are sinners, all we must do is call for help.

However, the grace of God even breaks the will of rebellious sinners. Before Christ knocked us of our high-horse, our wills were captive by sin. In sin, our will is in bondage, and it takes the radical grace of God to liberate our will so



that we can freely choose Christ. I think Charles Spurgeon said it best, "Free will I have often heard of, but I have never seen it. I have met with will, and plenty of it, but it has either been led captive by sin or held in blessed bonds of grace." At one point, Martin Luther got into a fierce debate with a humanist scholar by the name of Erasmus. Luther had the ability to be incredibly vicious with his opponents (he was a man with great flaws!), but he rightly understood man's inability to even receive salvation. Luther wrote in his book *Bondage of the Will*,

Let all the 'free-will' in the world do all it can with all its strength; it will never give rise to a single instance of ability to avoid being hardened if God does not give the Spirit, or of meriting mercy if it is left to its own strength.

In other words, if I rightly understand that no good thing dwells within me and that from birth I am a child of wrath, then the only way I could ever will salvation is if God changes my will. My sin only has hardened my heart against God. It's the radical grace of God that melts the hard hearts of sinners. You see though we are saved by faith alone, even our faith is a gift from God. We cannot will faith. God must do a work in our hearts called the new birth, that liberates our will so that we can gladly call out in faith to Jesus.

Salvation isn't something you cooperate with God to accomplish. Salvation isn't synergistic (meaning you cooperate together with God), rather Salvation works one way. God alone does the work! He alone does the saving!



If God has done this marvelous work of salvation in your life, if you've humbly put your faith in Jesus, then stand amazed at God's grace! There was nothing you did to summon it within yourself. You didn't earn it. Rather, God did it! Everything comes from him. We are saved by grace alone.

3. Sustained by God's grace: Walk in good Works. (Ephesians 2:10)

So, what is the role of good works in the Christian life if we are saved by grace? We will speak to this a great deal more in our final week of this series, however, Ephesians 2:10 helps give us the answer to that question.

By grace we are transformed from within, into God's own handiwork. Transformed by grace, we are sustained by grace to walk in good works for the glory of God. Good works are the fruit not the root of the Christian life. We are not saved by good works, but those saved by grace produce good works lived in worship to God.

As Christians, we live our life in obedience to king Jesus, and we seek to please him with our lives. But it's important to get the order right! Good works are the evidence of grace, not the cause of it. The life of grace will be marked by

good works, as the grace of God sustained us throughout our Christian lives. We will speak more about this in the upcoming weeks.

Final Thoughts

As we began this morning, I shared with you my own testimony of how I became gripped by the grace of God. From my upbringing in a pastor's home, to my history day project on Martin Luther, to encountering the reformers and puritans in college, the Lord helped me understand that my salvation from beginning to end is a work of grace. I was saved and I'm still being saved by the grace of God. I think many Christians don't fully understand what has actually happened to them. They put their faith in Jesus, but it's not till later in their Christian maturity that they begin to discover that all of it was by God's grace. If you're a Christian this morning, I pray that this sermon might mark a new depth of knowledge of God's grace to you. Out of all the five solas of the reformation, I believe that this one could be the most transformative in your Christian life. When you get that salvation is by God's grace alone, everything begins to change. You look at the Christian life differently, from obedience and holiness to evangelism and mission.

If you're not a Christian this morning, the invitation is simple. The God of grace has provided a way for you to escape condemnation. It's by putting your



faith in Christ Jesus. Perhaps this morning, God has allowed you to truly know your own heart. You feel the weight of guilt around your neck as a child of wrath. You've given into your fleshly desire too many times, and have slavishly followed in the pattern of this world. Take heart! God is rich in mercy and love towards sinners. Today, I urge you to repent and to respond in faith to Jesus Christ, who alone is our help and salvation. Call out to him in faith this day, and receive the grace of God.

We prepare to take the Lord's supper this morning. This table is a means of God's grace. Though there is nothing sacred about the elements themselves, the meal reminds us in a tangible way of God's grace. The feast of grace has been provided by the body and blood of Christ. Come, let us eat and drink in faith, trusting that the Spirit will further impress on our hearts the goodness of God's grace in the Gospel.