

GRACE ALONE (*SOLA GRATIA*)**EPHESIANS 2:1-10; ROMANS 3:23-26**

This Tuesday is a very important date for followers of Jesus: October 31, 2017. Our culture will celebrate Halloween. We should celebrate the Protestant Reformation. 500 years ago on October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther stood up against the most powerful human institution of his day – the Roman Catholic Church – and said, “Enough.” He nailed 95 theological objections questioning the leadership and theology of the Church to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. Please watch and listen to the following video.

In the video it mentioned indulgences. What were indulgences? An indulgence was a financial payment to the medieval Catholic Church. It was thought to buy you an exemption from being punished for some kinds of sins. The practice of selling indulgences was just one reason Luther posted his 95 objections and it was later outlawed by the Catholic Church itself. But by then a spiritual revolution had already been unleashed that changed Europe and then the world. We’re in the midst of considering five *solas* – the Latin word for alone – because they represent the major dividing points between the Catholic version of Christianity back in the 1500s and men like Martin Luther and others. Latin was kind of the official language for all scholarly and administrative communication back then. The other four *solas*? For the glory of God alone. Christ alone. The Bible alone. Faith alone. Now much has changed in 500 years. The Roman Catholic Church has changed for the better theologically. Some Protestants for the worse, frankly. But the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago was a God-ordained, God-orchestrated recovery of biblical truth. These five *solas* represent five core convictions for all genuine followers of Jesus for all time and forever.

The larger question behind the sale of indulgences and indeed the Reformation itself was this one, “How can a human being be made right with God? How can a human being stay right with God?” Those questions continue to get asked today in a variety of ways. Many different answers are given. The Bible’s answer is simple. It’s a core conviction for Christians. Grace alone. *Sola gratia*. If any two passages of Scripture nail this great truth to the wall today and forever it’s our two texts for this morning. Let’s ask and answer two questions.

WHY DO I NEED GRACE?

First of all, without grace, I’m spiritually dead. Overstatement? Exaggeration? Hyperbole? Well, Paul, the great Christian leader, wrote, “Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.” (Eph. 2:1 NLT) Dead in what sense? Dead in what way? Without Jesus, you are essentially dead to God. You cannot respond to God. His thoughts and ways are utterly alien to you. His values and priorities mean nothing to you. Yes, you can be physically alive, but spiritually dead. Your life is a living death. And the result of being without Jesus and His grace is death in every way a person can die: spiritually, morally, relationally, physically, and eternally.

Sin is the reason we're spiritually dead. It's ruined our relationship with God, with other people, and even with ourselves. It manifests itself far earlier and more universally than we care to admit. Shawna was a strong-willed four years old. She liked to ride her tricycle where she wasn't allowed to ride it. Her mom became so frustrated one day that she went out in the front yard and said, "All right, Shawna! Look, here's a tree. Here's the edge of the driveway. Here's our sidewalk. You may drive your tricycle in between the tree and the driveway, but you cannot take it beyond that. If you take it beyond those boundaries, I will spank you. I'm going back inside the house, but we have a big picture window. I will watch you. If you ride beyond these boundaries, I will come out, and there will be spanking." Shawna was not intimidated. She stuck her little hip out, pointed to it, and said, "Well you better spank me now, because I got places to go." True story! Humorous? Kind of, I admit, but it's also a picture of the human heart and the human condition. Four year olds grow into adults who find many ways to shake a fist at God and say, "You're not the boss of me. I will not do life Your way even if it causes me all kinds of pain. I got places to go and things to do."

Your heart is corrupt, and so is mine. We read today, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom. 2:23 NLT) But here's the problem. Because sin affects every person universally, we get used to it. It's like all these mass shootings in recent years. After a while we get numb to the horror of them. We just shake our heads, offer up a quick prayer, and get back to life. Whether it's injustice, poverty, violence, abuse, or lying, we get numb to sin. But God never gets used to it – any of it. He never looks at this broken, corrupt world and says, "Big deal. It could be worse." God's standard is the sinless, absolutely holy purity of His own nature. There's nothing severe or unreasonable about God or His standards. We were created by Him and we can only flourish when we live in an environment where justice, peace, truth, and compassion reign. But individually and corporately, we said and keep on saying, "You're not the boss of me. I will not do life Your way." The result is spiritual death.

Why do I need grace? Secondly, without grace, I'm a spiritual slave. People without Jesus like to think of themselves as being supremely free. They don't call anyone "Lord" or answer to anyone. But the Bible says that anyone without God's grace is a slave and is often unaware or blind to his or her own enslavement. A slave to what? Without grace, you're a slave to your own sinful nature. "All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature." (Eph. 2:3 NLT) It's a distorted self-centeredness that gets expressed in many different ways – greed, materialism, selfishness, hatred, pride, jealousy, lust, gossip, over-indulgence, bitterness, addictions, apathy – just to name a few.

Without grace, you're a slave to the world. "You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world...." (Eph. 2:2 NLT) Paul wasn't talking about planet Earth. He meant the prevailing value system in whatever culture in which we live. By "world", Paul was pointing to a kind of spiritual force or atmosphere that rejects and hates God and everything about God. The world also puts this incredible pressure on you and me to conform to its values and beliefs. We feel this great pressure to just give in – to get shaped by the perspective of the culture we live in. People without Jesus and His grace

are enmeshed in the world and its spiritual power. They walk around in it without realizing they're devoted and subservient to it. They're slaves to the world.

Without grace, you're a slave to the devil. "You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God." (Eph. 2:2 NLT) Many people think believing in the devil is unscientific and ignorant. That's fine with him. He's much more influential when he and his power aren't acknowledged at all. The Bible teaches us that the devil is a personal, spiritual being of great, evil power. He has the ability to work through the world and also through your sinful nature to tie you up in knots. The devil wants to destroy and ruin every human being. People without grace are enslaved to him and he could care less whether they acknowledge that fact or not.

Why do I need grace? Without grace, I'm spiritually condemned. "...By our very nature we were subject to God's anger, just like everyone else." (Eph. 2:3 NLT) By nature, you and I resist God. You've proven that by the fact that you've said and done things that are against His will or are contrary to His commands. We've all shaken our fists in God's face. That's earned you a terrible result: God's judgment. God's condemnation. Contrary to what you might think, God's great anger toward any and all sin is actually an expression of His love. You've never seen anger until you've had to confront a mother whose child you just hurt or injured in some way. Her anger is an expression of her love. God hates sin because it damages and destroys who and what He loves. Sin damages and destroys you; therefore, God will not excuse it or compromise with it.

Years ago, a man by the name of Dan Meyer went to Ecuador and spent a couple of weeks traveling in the mountains. The Quechua Indian people he met on his trip lived amidst the most mind-numbing squalor. The disease and disfigured bodies were heartbreaking. The bugs and stench were everywhere. People were living in a hole in the ground and calling it a house. They were feeding on rotten food and prizing garbage as possessions. But they didn't know it. Why? Because everyone lived that way. They'd never been given a picture of what it means to be a genuinely healthy human being. That's our problem, too. We think of ourselves as largely innocent people—people who have little to do with making the cross of Christ a necessity. We don't get how bad off we are spiritually. We're condemned, and we don't even know it.

I realize that most of us here today are grateful followers of Jesus, but we'd be naïve to believe that every person here today has truly received God's grace. My friend, have you ever thrown yourself upon God's grace? If not, it's my responsibility to say to you upon the authority of God's Word, that you're dead, you're a slave, and you're condemned to an eternity in Hell unless something changes. You must throw yourself upon God's grace. It's the only thing that will save you. Grace alone. *Sola gratia*. You must confess your sin and receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior. You must be born again by the Spirit of God. That leads us to ask and answer a second question today.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I RECEIVE GRACE?

By grace, I'm delivered from God. Paul wrote, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement...." (Rom 3:25 NIV) What is "a sacrifice of atonement"? Literally, it means to pacify or appease the wrath of a god by presenting to it a sacrifice of some kind. In primitive cultures – and this is true even today – people see the world being filled with gods and goddesses who get angry and upset sometimes over the most trivial of things. And so pagan religion is often about presenting little gifts or sacrifices to make some irritated god or goddess feel better about you. Now is the real God – the God of the Bible – like that, too? Many people think such concepts are unworthy of God. They overlook the fact all sin creates a debt that must be paid and that God demanded payment only from Himself. You don't have to give a sacrifice because He did.

The Bible says you and I are ungodly. It's like calling someone "un-American." You don't mean that such a person is German, Russian, or Australian. Instead, you mean he or she hates or is hostile to our country. By the same token, when you admit you're ungodly, you admit there's something inside of you that's opposed to God. There's an attitude and a spirit from which you need deliverance. You acknowledge you're at a loss to make it right in your own strength. It's only people who recognize how much they need to be delivered from God that ever get delivered by God. If you want to be right with God, it begins by recognizing how incredibly wrong you are with Him.

Followers of Jesus use the phrase "saved by grace." Why? Because we know we had to be delivered from God. "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it." (Eph. 2:8-9 NLT) If you want just the essential message of Christianity, it's hard to find a better statement than that one right there. Dead people can't do anything. Enslaved people can't do anything. Condemned people can't do anything. That's precisely why God had to take the initiative to do what He did. And why? God loves you not because you're so loveable and not because He's just an "old softy" at heart. For His own sake and as an expression of His own character, God showered you with His love. His love for you is expressed in His mercy and grace toward you.

Someone has described mercy as "not getting what I deserve" and grace as "getting what I don't deserve." There's nothing you have done, nothing you will ever do, and nothing you can ever do to remove God's judgment against your own personal sin. But here's some really good news! You don't have to deliver yourself from God. You're saved by and through grace. You're not delivered through some kind of educational program. You're not delivered because you've earned it. You can never deserve deliverance from God through your own personal effort to be good or moral. God delivered you by having His Son, Jesus, pay the penalty for your sin and mine when He died on the cross. Because of the cross, you and I are delivered. The Bible says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 Jo 4:10 NLT) You and I are delivered by grace.

What happens when I receive grace? By grace, I'm also purchased by God. Paul wrote, "And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by

Christ Jesus." (Rom 3:24 NIV) In the ancient world, people shopped for slaves at a slave market. They were purchased with money. That kind of transaction was called a "redemption." Remember, now, without grace, we're spiritual slaves. God came in the person of Jesus to buy us out of our slavery to sin, the world, and the devil. But a price had to be paid. There's a price to salvation. True enough, it cost you and me nothing. But it cost God the life of His own Son, Jesus. You've been bought and paid for by God Himself. It follows (doesn't it?) that you don't belong to yourself once you start to follow Jesus. That's why the Bible says, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price...." (1 Cor. 6:19-20 NLT) Redemption means you've been purchased at a great price. You now belong to God and God alone.

What happens when I receive grace? By grace, I'm also accepted by God. The Bible says, "All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus...." (Rom. 3:24 NIV) The word "justification" is a legal word. It comes from the world of courts and the practice of law. When you're justified before God, it means you've been declared "not guilty" in the Supreme Court of the Universe by the one and only Supreme Judge of the Universe.

Here are four important truths about justification. First, God's grace is the source of our justification before God. The Bible says, "All are justified freely by his grace...." (Rom. 3:24 NIV) God doesn't have to rescue anybody. God doesn't owe you, me, or anyone else a restored relationship with Him. No one has ever earned or deserved to spend eternity with Him in Heaven. A relationship with God comes to you and me only and forever as a gift. It's freely given and freely received. Grace is the gift of God. This was the great spiritual, biblical truth that was recovered and reclaimed by Martin Luther and the other Reformers 500 years ago. When Luther, who was a Bible scholar, saw that phrase 'the righteousness of God,' he thought, at first, it was a demand to make himself acceptable to God through his own moral effort. Despite all of his efforts to be righteous, Luther was tormented by the uncertainty of whether he'd ever done enough to make himself acceptable to God. But then the Holy Spirit revealed to him that God's righteousness isn't a demand, but a divine gift. God accepts you as His child at the beginning of your relationship with Him not at the end. You're accepted by God not because you did enough good things or acted spiritual enough. You're accepted because God granted acceptance to you as His gift. That's grace!

We all struggle to understand this great truth. Why is that? Because we live in a world where you're rewarded on the basis of what you do. When you do good work at school, your teacher gives you a star on your paper or an A on your report card. When you excel at a sport, you get a trophy. When you work hard at your job, you get a bonus. From birth you're taught that you receive rewards on the basis of your performance. When was the last time you threw your arms around your boss on payday and thanked him or her for your paycheck? It's a wage, not a gift. You earned it. You worked hard for it. You deserve it. You're owed it. But God will not owe you, me, or anyone else an eternal relationship with Him. You must receive it as a gift or not receive it at all.

Second, justification has a foundation. It's Jesus' death on the cross. Justification is about justice. For something to be just it has to have content and substance to it - a foundation. Justification isn't a pardon. You probably know the President of the United States can pardon anyone of any crime that he wishes. Maybe the most famous presidential pardon was the one Gerald Ford granted to Richard Nixon after his resignation as President. President Ford pardoned Nixon of any and all crimes he may have committed in the Watergate scandal. It was an official act to overlook or excuse any crimes Nixon may have committed. That's not justification. God didn't overlook your sin, excuse your sin, or rationalize your sin. Instead, He paid the penalty for your sin and mine Himself through His Son, Jesus, at the cross. Jesus died in your place and mine. Because of Jesus, then, the case against you has been dismissed. You're declared "not guilty." You're innocent. You're free to have a relationship with God.

Third, justification has a means. It's faith. The Bible says, "We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are." (Rom 3:22 NIV) What is faith? We'll discuss it in greater depth next Sunday. It's the last sola – *sola fide*. Faith isn't knowing all the important facts about Jesus. Faith isn't admiring Jesus for being a great Person. Faith is when you stop trusting in yourself to get accepted by God and, instead, you put all of your trust in Jesus and what He's already done for you. When you do that, you're declared right with God. Your eternal relationship with God begins then and there and it will never end.

Fourth, justification has wonderful results! All of your sins are forgiven. You receive the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit forever. You receive both peace with God and the peace of God. You're invited to participate in God's worldwide mission of bringing lost people to Him. You receive eternal life at that very moment and it continues on even after your physical death. Perhaps most wonderful of all, you receive the certain assurance that you're forever accepted by God and nothing can ever change that incredibly marvelous fact. Say it with me, "I am delivered! I am purchased! I am accepted!" And it's all because of grace. Grace alone. *Sola gratia*.

In August 1957, four climbers—two Italians and two Germans—were climbing the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face of the Eiger in the Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. A small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. They carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the North Face using a cable a fraction of an inch thick. Hellepart recalled his friends on the summit getting smaller and smaller as he was lowered down the North Face. They disappeared from his sight. Looking down and into the abyss of the North Face combined with holding tight to that thin cable that disappeared above him into the mist filled Hellepart with terror. He felt incredibly alone. He felt like he was dangling between Heaven and Hell. His only reason to keep going? To save the climbers below. Alfred Hellepart did save one of the climbers. The other had already died of exposure.

That's a picture of the Gospel story. We were trapped, but in the person of Jesus, God lowered Himself into the abyss of our sin and lostness. In Jesus, God became a human being dangling between Heaven and Hell. He did it to save the people trapped below—you and me. Following Jesus is more than just another religion telling us how to be good or how to make ourselves acceptable to God. It's the story of God's sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf. It's the story of grace alone. *Sola gratia.*