

Sola Gratia
Selected Scriptures
ABC 10/22/17

Do you know what today is? Today is *make a difference day!* It's also *national nut day, color day, CAPS-LOCK DAY, smart is cool day, mother-in-law day, & international stuttering day.* Our society tends to celebrate just about everything & we're celebrating the 500th anniversary of the protestant reformation this month. Martin Luther was a prolific writer. His complete works contain 55 volumes. Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther looked back at the numerous books he'd written & was willing that all of them be destroyed, except for 2: his small catechism & his *Bondage of the Will*.¹ The 1st book comes from his heart for Christian education. He wrote the catechism for those in the church, so they would know the fundamentals of the faith, which few knew during the days leading up to the reformation. In the preface to his catechism, he writes:

The deplorable, miserable conditions which I recently observed when visiting the parishes have constrained & pressed me to put this catechism of Christian doctrine into this brief, plain, & simple form. How pitiable, so help me God, were the things I saw: the common man, especially in the villages, knows practically nothing of Christian doctrine, & many of the pastors are almost entirely incompetent & unable to teach.

The 1st book Luther wanted to see preserved was for the people, for a broad understanding of the Christian faith. His 2nd book, on the other hand, *The Bondage of the Will*, was written on a more scholarly level. It wasn't written for the masses to give an overall understanding of the faith. Instead, it was an academic, thoroughly theological defense of the gospel. JI Packer & OR Johnston write, *The Bondage of the Will, ... is the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen. & ... is a major treatment of what Luther saw as the very heart of the gospel.*² It all began with a series of letters back & forth over the span of a few years between Luther & a man known as Erasmus. Erasmus was a man who loved books & buried himself in them. He was famously quoted as saying, *When I have a little money, I buy books; & if I have any*

¹ In July 1537 (10 years before he death), he wrote to Wolfgang Capito, *Regarding the plan to collect my writings in volumes, I am quite cool & not at all eager about it because, roused by a Saturnian hunger, I would rather see them all devoured. For I acknowledge none of them to be really a book of mine, except perhaps the one On the Bound Will & the Catechism.*

² *Bondage of the Will, Historical & Theological Introduction*, pp 40-41

*left, I buy food & clothes.*³ Because of his learning, he became one of the most prominent Roman Catholic scholars of the day. It's been said,

*No man in Europe could rival him in reading & writing the classical tongues. No man had such mastery of the treasures of ancient literature... No man commanded the ear of Pope, cardinal & king as did Erasmus.*⁴

They battled theology back & forth in these letters. Finally, Erasmus wrote a book about these things entitled, *Discussion, or Collation, concerning Free-Will*. Its Latin title begins with the word, *Diatribes*, so his work is often simply referred to as the *Diatribes*. It came off the presses on Sept 1, 1524. It was well received by the Pope & the Emperor.⁵ The premise of it is that humans have free-will to choose for God or not. Erasmus argued that the human will has the power to *apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same.*⁶ Martin Luther disagreed & wrote *The Bondage of the Will*. By that title he meant we have a total inability to save ourselves. It's only by the sovereign grace of God that we're saved from our sins. In other words, because of our sin, our salvation must be entirely of God's grace, because we bring nothing. Packer & Johnston write:

*Man through sin has ceased to be good. He has no power to please God. He is unable to do anything but continue in sin. His salvation, therefore, must be wholly of Divine grace, for he himself can contribute nothing to it; & any formulation of the gospel which amounts to saying that God shows grace, not in saving man, but in making it possible for man to save himself, is to be rejected as a lie. The whole work of man's salvation, first to last, is God's; & all the glory for it must be God's also. This was just what Erasmus would not say.*⁷

This is the point of Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. Our wills are so bound in sin that we need God's grace to save us. You could put it this way, *we are saved by grace alone*. This means our salvation from the wrath of God is because of something good in God, not because of anything good in us. Grace means there's something good in God & there's nothing good in us.

This month we've been looking at the cries of the reformation, often called the *Solas*. *Sola Scriptura* says that Scripture alone is our authority; *Sola Fide* stands for how we are saved by faith alone; *Sola Gratia* proclaims we're saved by grace alone; *Solus Christus* tells of how we're

³ 1522 1st edition *New Testament BIBLE Paraphrases of Erasmus of Rotterdam*

⁴ *Bondage of the Will, Historical & Theological Introduction*, p 17

⁵ *Ibid* p 38

⁶ *Ibid* p 137

⁷ *Ibid* p 48

saved by Christ alone; & *Soli Deo Gloria* demands we live to the glory of God alone. These were the foundational beliefs of the reformers, those who sought to reform the church away from its corruptions & toward **the simplicity & purity of devotion to Christ** (2 Cor 11:3). Though the reformers didn't use these specific phrases, they all embraced these specific truths about salvation. That the Scripture is our only inerrant guide in spiritual matters. That our salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That our entire lives are to be lived for the glory of God alone. These are all biblical truths. That's why we're looking at the Solas this month as we honor the 500th anniversary of the Reformation's beginning. Today, we come to grace alone &, with Luther, we agree this is the core of the gospel! Last time we looked at *Sola Fide*, justification by faith alone. But the foundation of by faith alone is by God's grace alone. The Reformers all believed in the utter helplessness of man in sin & they all believed in the sovereignty of God in giving grace. *To all of them, these doctrines were the very life-blood of the Christian faith.*⁸ Again I quote from Johnston & Packer,

The doctrine of free justification by faith only ... is often regarded as the heart of the Reformers' theology, but this is hardly accurate. The truth is that their thinking was really centered upon the contention of Paul, echoed with varying degrees of adequacy by Augustine ... & Wycliffe, that the sinner's entire salvation is by free & sovereign grace only. The doctrine of justification by faith was important to them because it safeguarded the principle of sovereign grace; but it actually expressed for them only one aspect of this principle, & that not its deepest aspect.

The sovereignty of grace found expression in their thinking at a profounder level still, in the doctrine of monergistic regeneration--the doctrine, that is, that the faith which receives Christ for justification is itself the free gift of a sovereign God, bestowed by spiritual regeneration in the act of effectual calling.

To the Reformers, the crucial question was not simply, whether God justifies believers without works of law. It was the broader question, whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, & whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ's sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith.

*Here was the crucial issue: whether God is the author, not merely of justification, but also of faith; whether, in the last analysis, Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for salvation & all things necessary to it, or of self-reliance & self-effort. The principle of sola fide is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of sola gratia.*⁹

⁸ Ibid p 58

⁹ Ibid pp 58-59

In other words, *Sola Gratia* is the foundation upon which *Sola Fide* stands. Without God's grace alone, salvation by faith alone fails to stand.

We sometimes define grace as the unmerited favor of God. That's true, but it doesn't go far enough. Grace really is the contrary-to-merit favor of God. God's grace is that which causes Him to reach out to guilty sinners who deserve death & hell & to shower His kindness upon them. It's not that we were spiritual zeroes & God pulled us into the plus column. No, we're stuck in the eternal minus column & God, seeing our negative condition, transfers us from eternal minus to eternal plus. Grace means that salvation starts with God, not with man. He takes the initiative, He makes the 1st move. If God didn't do so, you'd never make any move at all. We often think grace means we do our part & God does His. We like to think of ourselves as being able to handle anything. We've got unlimited confidence in our own ability. But when applied to the arena of salvation *can do* is deadly poison. Grace means we owe everything to God. But don't we have a part to play? That question reminds me of a story from the late Harry Ironside.

In one of his sermons he spoke about a man who rose in a Sunday night service to give his testimony. In it he magnified the grace of God. Afterwards a friend came to him with a comment: *You said a great deal about God's part in your salvation. Why didn't you say anything about your part?* The man paused for a moment said, *Please forgive me. My part was to run away from God as fast as I could. I kept running until he finally caught me.*¹⁰

Grace teaches us that our only part in salvation is to do the sinning & the running away from God. He does the rest.

Let me give you some theological words that help to put things in perspective: *Monergism* & *Synergism*. *Monergism* comes from the roots of *mono* meaning one; & *ergism* (energy), meaning working. Pertaining to salvation, it means salvation is a work of God alone. *Synergism* comes from the roots of *syn*, meaning with; & *ergism*, again meaning working. In theological terms, it means God cooperates with us in our salvation. *Monergism* means: *God, alone, works on the soul to bring about spiritual regeneration.* *Synergism* means: *The human will cooperates with God's grace to bring about spiritual regeneration.* *Monergism* is *Sola Gratia*. *Monergism* is the view of Luther & the reformers. *Synergism* is the view of Erasmus which says one party comes part of

¹⁰ *Illustrations of Bible Truth*, electronic edition

the way & the other party comes the other part of the way. So that salvation is part us & part God. They think,

I'm bringing something to my salvation, however small that something is. I came to God with my faith. I came to God when I prayed to receive Christ. I came to God when I understood what He did for me.

That's *synergism*. & that's not the position of the reformers. More importantly, it's not the teaching of Scripture. The gospel, the good news is that God comes to me & draws me to Himself, gives me the faith to believe, & adopts me into His family, crediting Christ's righteousness to my account. That's the gospel! That's by God's grace alone. God is the One who took the initiative & provided all that is needed for my salvation. Nothing the sinner does commends him to God. The sinner doesn't even cooperate with God in order to merit his salvation. Salvation, from beginning to end, is the sovereign gift of God to the unworthy & undeserving sinner. The point the Reformers wanted to make in the 16th century is the same point that Augustine made in the 5th & Paul made in the 1st: We aren't saved by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. The fallen sinner isn't a drowning man who merely needs to do his part by reaching out to grab the life preserver tossed by God. No, the sinner suffers from a far more serious condition. He can't grab a life-line because he isn't merely drowning; he's a dead, lifeless corpse on the bottom of the sea. If he's to be saved, he won't be able to cooperate with God. His salvation will be an act of pure grace, & grace alone, on the part of God (Eph 2:8).

With that bit of background & theology about the *Solas* let's go to Scripture to see this truth. Open to Eph. Paul here shows our condition before being saved & what God does in our salvation. & I trust you'll see the truths of *Sola Gratia* in this passage. Before we actually look at this passage, let's pray Paul's prayer in chpt 1. **1:15-19**

Paul is presenting to those in Ephesus the gospel, & in doing so, he's putting forth the greatness of God's grace, & he's praying they might understand how great God is. That's what we want as well. **2:1-3**.

We have to stop here & talk a bit about our state before God. Paul says that we were **dead in ... trespasses & sins** (1). He said we were **by nature children of wrath** (3). This is the astonishing

effect of sin. Sin kills! Adam & Eve were created sinless. But when they sinned, they became sinners. Because of this everyone is born a sinner. As cute & cuddly as a baby is, they are a sinner. You don't have to teach them to sin, it's their nature. & as a result, they're under the wrath of God. That's the condition of every human being that enters this world. We are sinners under God's wrath. If that's not bad enough, we're dead spiritually, dead to the things of God. Fortunately, that's not the final word. **2:4-6**

Sola gratia is what makes the gospel good news. It helps us to understand that while the Bible says there is **no one who seeks God** (Rom 3:11), the good news is that God seeks after sinners. Jesus said He came to what? Seek & save that which is lost (Lk 19:10. It's God who acts, God who draws the sinner to Himself, God who gives life to person who is **dead in their trespasses & sins**, God who causes a person to be born again so they can enter the kingdom of God. Those who deny grace alone, either in words or actions, end up with a gospel that entails God bringing man only so far along the path of salvation & then leaving it up to man to save himself by making a decision for Christ. As a result of this cooperative effort, man is then saved not by grace alone but by grace plus works. However, this is not the gospel presented in the Bible because everything man does is tainted by sin, so unless God fully brings it to pass, sinful man will never respond in faith to the gospel.

We see God's grace on display, Paul says, when God makes the dead alive in Christ. What does it mean to be **dead**? It means to be under condemnation. Before Christ, we were dead in the trespasses & sins in which we once walked. Death, God told Adam, is the penalty for sin. When we violate the law of God, we stand guilty before this holy God, accountable to His justice. To be dead means we were slaves of Satan, living according to the world & the flesh. Therefore, we were under wrath. We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (2:3). We deserved the wrath of God for our sin. We were this way **by nature**, we were born into this condition. Many don't like this fact. Many assume people are basically good. They tend to believe if we give people the right education, examples, or laws, then they'll follow the right path. As good as these might be, they're powerless to change a heart committed to its rebellion against

God. Inside the church, many say that people are sick, even desperately sick. However, they're still said to have the ability to respond to & cooperate with the grace of God. But Paul doesn't say we're sick. He says apart from Christ, we are dead. We're corpses rotting in the ground without Jesus. We can no more draw near to God than a corpse can summon the strength to get out of its grave. That's how bad off we are. When a sinner comes to Christ it's no less miraculous than when Jesus rose from the dead. He was dead physically & God made Him alive. We were dead spiritually & God made us alive so we might live for Him & His glory. This is the imagery Paul uses to describe our salvation. We were dead but God made us alive. & the whole point is this: It is by His grace alone. Vs 5 says, **by grace you have been saved**. If it was part us & part God, then it's not grace.

Kendra had a bridal shower yesterday. Many of you gave her & Brandon a gift. In a sense, to some degree, they earned it by getting engaged & planning to marry. Grace is the party thrown for Kendra if she were strung out on heroin, constantly stole from you, actively hated you, rebelled against you, & wanted to kill you. It's the party thrown for the prodigal son in Lk 15. That's grace. It's mercy & love. Mercy isn't giving him what he deserves. Love is giving him what he doesn't deserve. & those are exactly the terms that God uses in **2:4-5**.

God raised Christ from the dead & seated Him at His right hand (1:18-20), & He's done something incredible to us in our union with Christ. God has made the dead alive. That's what brings about Paul's exclamation, **By grace you have been saved** (2:5). Why did God make the dead alive? It wasn't because of our works, neither the works that we did before we became Christians nor the works we've done after we became Christians. Otherwise, we might have cause to boast (9). Instead, Paul says, God made us alive because of His mercy, His great love with which He loved us (4). Paul goes out of his way to impress upon us that God's own love & mercy are where of our salvation comes from.

We're saved by the grace of God alone. Far from leading us to embrace lives of sin, the grace of God leads us to pursue lives of consecration & holiness. Isaac Watts captured Paul's point well when he wrote in his hymn *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross: Were the whole realm of nature*

mine, that were a present far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. & our response is one of praise! This is the point of the 1st half of Eph 1. It's a chapter of praise! Look at **1:3-6**.

This is praise to God for the spiritual blessings that God has given to us! & they're all about God's grace. That's the idea of election (4) & predestination (5). God's choosing & predestinating us takes place **before the foundation of the world** (4). Before we ever did anything good or bad, God, in His sovereign pleasure, chose those to whom He will extend His grace, totally unmerited. It's not that God looked down the corridors of time to see those who would believe & then chose them. That's not grace. That's bringing something to God & having God respond. The whole idea of God's electing & predestinating work is such that it makes salvation entirely a work of God. That's grace. That's our bringing nothing to God. That's what Augustus Toplady wrote in 1763 in the hymn *Rock of Ages: Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to the cross I cling*.¹¹ As Luther wrote,

*God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is, to those who mourn over & despair of themselves. But a man can't be thoroughly humbled until he realizes that His salvation is utterly beyond his own power, effort, will, or works & depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure & work of another, God alone.*¹²

Did you notice that these things are called **grace**? Eph 1:6 says, **To the praise of the glory of His grace**. Grace leads us to worship, both now & for all eternity. We worship God because of His great grace to us! Eph 2 looks at our worship in the future. We'll forever worship God because of His great grace to us! Look at 2:7. God made us alive ... **so that in the coming ages He might show the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus**. Our presence in heaven is an opportunity for God to show off His grace! The mere fact that any of us are in heaven is a testimony of God's grace! None of us will be there boasting of anything we've done. Heaven is all about grace. In heaven God will show off His trophies, those whom He has redeemed! We put trophies & ribbons on display to show off our accomplishments & achievements. & as others come & see, they rejoice with us. God is no different. He's going to put forth His trophies of grace: us! & if we take any credit for our presence in heaven, then the

¹¹ Hymn # in our hymnal

¹² *Bondage of the Will*, p 100

trophy is tainted. Anything less than by God's grace alone puts ourselves on display & not God. By claiming you had something to do with your salvation, in some measure (however small), you take away from the glory of God. Because, your salvation is all about His grace! Luther wrote, *He who does not receive salvation purely through grace, independently of all good works, certainly will never secure it. &, Truly, then, we are saved by grace alone, without works or other merit.*¹³

That's what vs 8-10 tell us. **2:8-10**

If you're a believer in Jesus, know that you're saved from your sins by the grace of God. Not because of any works you've done. & you have nothing to boast about. Maybe you're thinking, *I bring my faith to God. Isn't that what vs 8 says? **You have been saved through faith.** It's not God's faith. It's my faith. That's what I bring.* If that's how you feel, look at the rest of the vs. **2:8**

What is not of your own doing? The answer is: everything. Grace is a gift from God. Faith is a gift from God. Our salvation is a gift from God. **9**

God saves us in such a way that there is no boasting! There's absolutely nothing we bring to the table. It's all of grace! God gives faith. God gives repentance. God gives salvation. Do you remember when the Jewish church was wrestling with including the Gentiles in the church? They concluded by glorifying God, saying, **God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life** (Acts 11:18). It's the sheer, sovereign grace of God that brings us to Himself. Apart from His acting, we'd be condemned in our sin. But praise be to God that He gives faith & grants repentance. All by His grace.

I began this message by talking about these letters Luther & Erasmus exchanged before their books came out. In one letter, Luther wrote to Erasmus, *Your thoughts of God are too human.*¹⁴ Many who resist these things are resisting the supreme God of the universe who has all things in the grip of His hand, who turns our hearts like channels of water, wherever He wills (Prov 21:1). People don't like it when they think of God's hand in the affairs of men. They think it makes them puppets. We aren't puppets. You know we live & act as we please. But the issue is that our hearts (& our wills) are in bondage. They are in bondage to sin. We need God to break that

¹³ Sermon on Titus 3:4-8

¹⁴ Ibid p 87

bondage. There are all sorts of objections to these things. People say, *If it's all of God's grace, then what are people going to do? Won't they live sinful lives?* I say, *No*, because vs 10 shows us the way those who've experienced this grace will respond. We'll walk in the good works that God has prepared for us. **2:10**

Others say, *If it's all of God's grace, then we don't need to share the gospel with those who are apart from Christ, because God is going to save them anyway.* To this, I again say, *No*. If you genuinely believe these things, you'll tell others of God's grace in Christ Jesus. Why did Jesus tell us to proclaim the gospel? Why do we tell others the good news of the gospel? Why do we explain the way of salvation? Not because we think ourselves to be smart enough to convince & persuade people into believing. But because our hope is in God, who brings sinners to Himself. Do you ever pray for the salvation of others? Then you're asking God to break the bondage of someone's will & you're believing in *Sola Gratia*. & this is what Martin Luther (& the rest of the reformers) experienced during the days of the Reformation. God was at work in the hearts of many, granting faith, & repentance. Do you know this grace? Have you believed in Jesus?¹⁵

Let's wrap up this sermon by considering 4 implications of God's amazing grace. 1st, it destroys all human self-confidence. We hear a great deal about self-esteem & self-worth. May I say to you that in the deepest biblical sense there's no such thing as self-esteem or self-confidence. Instead, the Bible teaches us to have God-esteem & God-confidence. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that apart from God, there's no firm ground for self-esteem & self-confidence. We often sing, *My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood & righteousness. I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name.*¹⁶ How true that is. Outside of Jesus there is no hope & therefore no ground for lasting self-confidence. All other ground is sinking sand.

2nd, God's grace frees us from having to win God's favor. Because God is gracious, we don't have to do things in order to make Him gracious. This liberates us from the endless cycle of doing more & more things simply because we hope to pacify God. Grace means that God loves us eternally & showers His kindness upon us.

¹⁵ For further truth see Rom 9, 1 Cor 1-2, Jn 6 & 8, Mt 11, Habakkuk, among others

¹⁶ *The Solid Rock*, Edward Mote

3rd, grace enables us to serve God without fear. So often we wonder if we're praying enough, witnessing enough, serving enough to make God happy. The answer of course is no, we're not doing enough, which is why putting yourself on a performance standard can never make you happy. On the other hand, if you understand that God accepts us on the basis of what Jesus has done, then you can relax because you know God looks at you as His child. He's pleased with you & isn't trying to find ways to break you down.

4th, grace take the pressure off us in witnessing. We don't have to pressure people into salvation. Sometimes we think their salvation depends on us & not on God. Our job is to make the message clear. It's God's job to save the lost. We don't save people, God does.

Our salvation depends entirely on God! This is what sola gratia really means. You contribute nothing to your own salvation. Even your faith is a gift from God! Eph 2:8 tells us that **by grace you have been saved through faith, & that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God**. Notice the 3 words: **grace, saved, faith**. Then notice the word **it** in the second part. What is the antecedent of **it**? Is it **grace**, is it **saved**, or is it **faith**? The answer is yes! It's all 3. The grace is not of yourself, the salvation is not of yourself, & even the faith to believe is not of yourself. Luther put it well with these words: *God creates faith in the human heart the same way that He created the world. He found nothing & created something.*¹⁷ God's grace is everything for the Christian. By grace alone, God chose His people before creation. By grace alone, Christ chose to die for His people. By grace alone, God causes His people to be born again so they are new creations. & decisively, God's grace transforms us into holy people.

Let me close with one last quote from Luther:

*When God in His sheer mercy & without any merit of mine has given me such unspeakable riches, shall I not then freely, joyously, wholeheartedly, unprompted do everything that I know will please Him?*¹⁸

Has God given you the faith to believe the gospel? Then repent & place your faith in Christ alone, by God's grace alone, through faith alone.

¹⁷ Quoted at <http://bethanycentral.org/resources/sola-gratia/10-01-17-grace-alone>

¹⁸ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p 230