

Altavista Presbyterian Church
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“Five Solae of the Reformation:
Sola Gratia”
Genesis 6:5-8
Titus 3:3-8

Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 1, 2017

Genesis 6:5-8

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.

Titus 3:3-8

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure.

I desire that you insist on these things, so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.

“Five Solae of the Reformation: *Sola Gratia*”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This morning we’re continuing in our Reformation sermon series. In a lead up to Reformation Sunday, which is October 29th, we’ll take a look at the five *solae*, or five “alones.” These were areas of interest to the Reformers. As I mentioned last week, these five are not standalone truths, independent or in conflict with one another. Rather, these are five axioms that point us toward the singular truth that God’s grace is uniquely revealed in his Word, which reveals the work of Christ, which becomes ours by faith, with everything rebounding to his glory. Last week we talked about *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone. The Reformers argued that Scripture is the only authoritative source of God’s self-revelation, and therefore it should be the lens through which we see the world or the scale with which we measure our lives and actions. The overall thrust of the Bible, or the thesis statement, if you will, has to do with God’s grace. Which is why today’s phrase is *sola gratia*. Like last week, we’ll divide the sermon into three sections: the historical objection, the biblical precedent, and the modern application of grace alone.

Historical Objection

For this morning, I would like us to start with this understanding of grace: theologically speaking, there are two manifestations of it. There is divine grace and then there is human grace.

We're actually going to touch on human grace in the modern application section. For now, all I'll say is that is man's response of and to graciousness. For this section, however, I want us to look a little closer at divine grace. Grace must be viewed within the bounds of God's sovereign authority as Judge and King. Both the Reformers and the Roman Church agreed that humanity was separated from God by sin. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, thus disobeying the only rule God established, they introduced sin into the world. Before that moment in history, Adam and Eve had a very personal relationship with God. God was known to walk about the Garden of Eden. You could imagine the three of them hanging out together at Dairy Freeze. That was the type of relationship humanity had with God. But after man's fall from grace, after the introduction of sin and wickedness, God needed to separate himself from his now despoiled creation. This all revolves around God's holiness. God, who is perfectly holy and perfectly pure, cannot coexist on the same plain with iniquity. This is because iniquity is perfect *unholiness* and perfect *impurity*. And these two are like polar opposites of a magnet. But instead of repelling one another, one must be destroyed by the other. And since God is sovereign and eternal, iniquity and wickedness must be destroyed. Which is why the human race is subject to God's righteous judgement.

This is the theological starting point where both the Reformers and the Roman Church stand. Where things begin to diverge in relationship to God's grace happens in man's participation with divine grace. The Medieval church had what was—and to this day is still called—the treasury of merit, or treasury of the church. This treasury is filled with Christ's work, which is infinitely meritorious before God. That is to say, Christ's life, death, and resurrection contribute positively to this treasury. Not only did Christ deposit into the treasury, Catholics believe the Virgin Mary and all the saints also contributed from their good deeds. So, this treasury, which holds an innumerable amount of merit, is accessible to the whole church because of what Paul says about his working on behalf of the church in Colossians 1:24-25. Additionally, the treasury of merit is connected with the Catholic sacrament of penance, or repentance of sins. When a person commits a mortal sin, they are able to dip into the treasury and make a withdrawal of merit on their behalf or on behalf of a loved one. By the time of the 16th century, this system had developed into the practice of indulgences. Which is where Luther steps in.

Luther began seeing issues with indulgences and the sacrament of penance when he first visited Rome. There's a stairway at the Vatican where a person who wishes to seek forgiveness may kneel at every step and say some Hail Mary's. As an individual progresses up these steps, he or she receives more forgiveness. Luther, when he went to these steps, found barely any room, for the entire stairway was filled with penitent pilgrims. The final straw to break the back for Luther was when he learned another priest in the next town over was selling indulgences to the poor, who could barely even feed themselves. The sale of indulgences was essentially a person buying or paying for an exchange or withdrawal from the treasury of merit on behalf of himself or on behalf of a deceased loved one in purgatory. At this Luther was absolutely furious. In fact, number sixty-two of the *Ninety-Five Theses* protested that "the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God."¹ By grace alone is a person saved. Not by how much money they give. Not by how many Hail Mary's they pray. Not by the meritorious works

of others. Moreover, without grace first and only, Christ's death and resurrection would never have happened nor would it amount to anything. The Reformers asserted that divine grace must happen first, before we can ever receive God's benefits.

Biblical Precedent

Biblically speaking, grace and salvation are intimately connected. Specifically, the goal of salvation is the promotion of God's grace and kindness. We see this in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. There, the Apostle states we are made alive together with Christ,

So that in the coming ages [God] might *show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us* in Christ Jesus. 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. For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand*, that we should walk in them.²

Our salvation, our forgiveness, and our new life in Christ is a gift, undeserved yet freely given. As Paul says here and elsewhere, we do not merit any salvation. There's no treasury that we can dip into or from which we withdraw. All the saints of this earth do not deposit merit into this treasury. Rather, the merit of Christ's great and wonderful work is imputed or reflected on those whom God prepared beforehand. Not only is this true of salvation, but also of faith itself. Since faith and salvation are part and parcel in the whole complex of redemption, faith, too, must be understood as a gift of God and not as a human achievement. Sinners are dependent on God's gracious gift for their believing response to Christ from the moment of conversion. So, both salvation and faith are wholly God's work, received *sola gratia*, through grace alone, and in no way contingent on the intentions or actions of those whom God saves. And for Paul, the Christian's utter dependence on divine grace and kindness silences all human boasting. This is encouraging to me because I know if the final analysis were left to me, if I truly had the final decision on my salvation, I know that sin's corruption would stop me from choosing God. Because of sin, we are naturally predisposed to never choose God. Thankfully, God chooses you.

Modern Application

Only after a person has received God's graciousness is he or she able to perform good works. Only after God's grace do a person's deeds garner merit. The Apostle asserts this in his letter to Titus, which we read this morning. And this is where we can apply *sola gratia* to our modern lives. For some people, redemption through grace alone sounds like there's no responsibility for the Christian. And it is true, there are some who believe that grace alone means they can continue in their life of sin. Nevertheless, the Christian's accountability to God's holiness is still very much part of this system. Even though we may have God's free gift of grace, we are not at liberty to remain in opposition to God. In fact, Paul and the Reformers were very clear that a person who remains in sin is not in God's grace, even if he or she may come to church or even profess Christ. Jesus himself said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven."³ Instead, those who are touched by God's grace will undoubtedly reflect that graciousness in their own lives. That's exactly what the Apostle was getting across to Titus

when he writes, “I desire that you insist on these things [that is salvation by grace alone], so that those who have come to believe in God may be careful to *devote themselves to good works; these things are excellent and profitable to everyone.*”⁴

This understanding of grace is what I earlier called “human grace” or humanity’s response to grace. While we believe good works neither save us nor influence our redemption; good works do, however, reflect God’s grace that is in us. The great pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer touches on this in the first chapter of his most famous treatise *The Cost of Discipleship*.

[Grace] is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is *grace* because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is *costly* because it costs a man his life, and it is *grace* because it gives a man the only true life. It is *costly* because it condemns sin, and *grace* because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son...and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us...Grace is *costly* because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is *grace* because Jesus says, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”⁵

Human grace, or as Bonhoeffer calls it, costly grace is our response of *sola gratia*. It means we must turn away from sin and the love of sinning. It means we must respond to Christ’s call and claim on our lives. It means we are to be more gracious and loving, reflecting the grace and love God gives to us. Not only should we pray, “Lord, make me more holy,” but also, “Lord, make me more gracious.” We need to show grace, costly grace, because that is how we witness to God’s grace. Not only are we saved by grace alone, but we are also heralds of grace alone. Not hatred, not disobedience, not wickedness, but grace.

Now, Paul’s sentence on redemption is that we are saved by grace through faith. Therefore, next week we’re going to talk about *sola fide*, faith alone. For now, I invite you to join me in prayer. Most Holy and Loving God, you shower us with the gift of grace. You instill within us the faith to call on you. You forgive us of our sins because of Christ’s selfless sacrifice. Thank you, God. Thank you for your unmerited kindness and goodness toward us. Even though we are fickle, you are steadfast. Encourage us to be witnesses of that selfsame, steadfast love. Help us to answer the call of costly grace and live in response to your graciousness. By the power of Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1515-16), in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, ed. J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-86) 25:261, 496-97.

² Ephesians 2:7-10

³ Matthew 7:21

⁴ Titus 3:8

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 45.