

Truths of the Reformation (4) By Grace Alone

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Our subject this morning is “By Grace Alone.” As a way of celebrating and remembering the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation we are looking at some of the key truths of the Reformation. So far, we have considered the idea of “Scripture Alone” and the idea of “Glory to God Alone.” In the next few weeks we will consider “Christ Alone” and “By Faith Alone.” Today our subject is “By Grace Alone.” Together these make up what is known as the 5 *solas* of the Reformation. The word “*sola*” is Latin for “alone.”

The theologians of the Reformation period did not actually use these phrases as slogans to refer to aspects of their teaching. That came much later. But the 5 *solas* do accurately summarize some of the key biblical truths that the Reformers recovered and so they provide a handy framework for expounding the heart of Reformation teaching. The term “alone” in each case is intended to put human beings in their place. Each of the 5 *solas* exalts God and humbles man. Sinful human beings tend to exalt man at the expense of God. Biblical teaching exalts God and humbles man even as it teaches that mankind has an important role to play in God’s world.

So, this morning we look at the slogan, “By Grace Alone.” This refers to the fact that salvation is by grace alone. The basic idea is that salvation is not a cooperative effort between God and man. It means that we contribute nothing to our salvation – that God does not save us because of anything in us or because of anything that we do. In no way do we make ourselves worthy. We do not take the first step when it comes to our salvation. We only become active after God has first acted upon us. So, it is not a combination of God’s grace and our faith or God’s grace and our efforts. Salvation is by grace alone. If it depended upon us even a tiny little bit, there would be no salvation. If it depended on us taking the first step, not one human being would be saved.

Salvation by grace alone is the only possible way of salvation because of the nature of our sinful condition. The Bible teaches that every human being ever born was born with a sinful nature. That means that every one of us is born alienated from God at the core of our being. We are born with an anti-God nature. The Heidelberg Catechism, which was written 46 years after Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door at Wittenberg, says that we are “prone by nature to hate God and [our] neighbor,” that because of “the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve ... our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin,” and that “we [are] so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil.”

That is the Reformation teaching about the sinfulness of the human race. And as we will see that is the **biblical** teaching of the sinfulness of the human race. It is because of this that salvation must be all of grace. Because of our sinful nature we hate God, we refuse to submit to his laws, we insist on our own way, and we cannot change the way we are. We must be changed by God sending his Holy Spirit into our hearts and changing us at the core of our being. We are sinners and we are not able to change that on our own. And so, without God’s grace changing us, we will never turn to God and we will never do anything that is good in God’s sight.

Now that might seem to be unrealistic and extreme. Surely people are capable of doing some good. What about non-Christian people who are kind and nice and give to charity and help other people? Well such actions are good in one sense. It is better to help an old lady to cross the street than to steal her purse. But even that kind of goodness does not come close to what God requires of us. The Bible says in Romans 14:23, “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Even though it is good in some sense to help an old lady across the street, it is still sin if it does not proceed from faith. It is only a genuinely good act in God’s sight if it is rooted in faith in God and a desire to please him. So even the good things that unbelievers do are still sin because they are not motivated by faith in God and a desire to please him.

Now one of the passages that teaches that our sinful condition is such that we can only be saved by grace alone is Ephesians 2:1-10. Verse 1 of

Ephesians 2 says that before anyone is saved they are dead in trespasses and sins. "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." This is how the Bible describes all men by nature apart from salvation. We are dead in trespasses and sins. Now clearly this does not refer to physical death. Unsaved people are not physically dead. Paul here is referring to spiritual death. Unsaved people are spiritually dead. They are dead towards God.

In the first three verses of Ephesians 2, Paul describes what it means to be dead in trespasses and sins. Such people walk in "trespasses and sins," they follow "the course of this world," they follow "the prince of the power of the air" [the devil], they live "in the passions of [their] flesh," they carry "out the desires of the body and the mind" and they are "children of wrath." That is the condition of every one of us apart from salvation. And the shorthand for all that is that by nature we are spiritually dead.

It is because of this that salvation must be by grace alone. The imagery of death makes it clear that we cannot contribute to our salvation. We cannot turn to God if we are dead. We cannot believe in Jesus if we are dead. We cannot turn from our sins if we are dead in trespasses and sins. And the reason that we cannot is that we will not. Before God acts upon us in salvation we have no desire to be right with God. We have no desire to submit to God and do his will. We are bent towards sin and ourselves and there is no desire for God. Jeremiah makes the point explicitly in Jeremiah 13:23. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil."

You see this is what we bring to the table when it comes to salvation – nothing but sin and rebellion against God. That is why salvation cannot be a cooperative effort between God and us. We are spiritual dead and we cannot make ourselves alive. If change is going to take place something must come from outside of us. It must come from God alone. And this is exactly what Paul describes in Ephesians 2:4-5, "4But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5even when we were dead in our trespasses, **made us alive** together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—"

So, if we are saved it is because God has raised us from the dead spiritually speaking. He has made us alive together with Christ. We do not contribute to that in any way. We are acted upon by the power of God. What happens to us is the same thing that happened to Jesus when he was raised from the dead. That is what Paul means when he says that God “made us alive together with Christ.” It is the resurrection life of Christ that brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life. And we are completely passive at this point.

Paul sums this up in Ephesians 2:8-10. Notice the passive language in these verses. ⁸“For by grace you **have been saved** through faith. And **this is not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For **we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God saves us. We do not save ourselves. We do not even contribute to our salvation. Salvation is by grace alone.

Now the fact that we are passive at the beginning of salvation does not mean that we remain passive. When a person who is spiritually dead is raised together with Christ he or she begins to live that life that God has given. Once a person is given spiritual life he or she becomes troubled by their sins and turns from them and turns to the Lord in faith seeking forgiveness and renewal in Christ. Obviously, the Christian life involves doing things – believing, repenting, obeying. These are things that we do. God in the Bible tells us to do many things. Salvation involves changes in the way we live.

But we are passive at the very beginning. The change from death to life is something that God does to us. It is something that happens to us. We are completely passive at this point. We can’t raise ourselves from the dead. We cannot even help. Spiritually speaking we are like Lazarus in the grave and we become active only after God speaks the word that raises us from the dead. But once we are alive, we begin to live the life that God calls us to live and that takes effort on our part.

It is important to understand, however, that in most cases we are not aware of the exact moment that God gives us spiritual life. Jesus speaks to this issue in John 3. John 3:1-8 is about the new birth. This is one of the ways that the Bible speaks of being brought from spiritual death to

spiritual life. We are born again. But notice how Jesus speaks about the experience of the new birth. In John 3:8 he says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Jesus is saying that there is lots about the wind that we do not know. We "do not know where it comes from or where it goes." There is something mysterious about the wind. But, Jesus says, we "hear its sound." We perceive the effects of the wind. There is a lot we don't know about the wind, but we are aware of the wind when it blows. And so, Jesus says, "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

There is something mysterious about God bringing dead sinners to spiritual life. We do not know exactly when it happens. We are not aware of it when it happens. God is changing us in the depths of our being. But what we become aware of is the effects. We begin to think differently. We become aware of our sins and concerned about our guilt. We become aware of a desire to be right with God. We begin to pray and we desire to get to know God. We listen to the gospel with new interest. We respond to the gospel invitation to believe. We begin to fight against sin and to strive for obedience. We are probably not aware of the moment that God makes us alive together with Christ, but we will become aware of the effects of that new life in our interests and our concerns and our desires.

What this means practically is that we are not to be passive when it comes to faith and obedience. This is a mistake that some people make in response to this teaching that we are dead in sin and salvation begins with God giving us new life in Christ. There are those who accept this teaching that we are dead in sin until God makes us alive in Christ, but who then incorrectly draw the conclusion that we must then wait until God saves us. There is a certain logic to this way of thinking. We are dead until God makes us alive and so if we want to be saved we just have to wait until God saves us. The most we can do is pray that God may send his Spirit to give us the new life. And so, people are passive with respect to salvation. They just wait for it to happen.

But that is not biblical thinking at all. The same Bible which tells us that we are dead in sin and that salvation is a gift of God also invites us and

urges us to turn from our sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This is how the gospel is presented to us in the Bible. We are called to repentance and faith. The call comes with urgency and honesty. God means what he says. There is no doubt that if a sinner comes to Christ and turns from his sins, he will be saved. The Bible does not say, wait until you are born again and then believe. It says, come without delay because the danger is so great and the stakes are so high. Do not wait, but come to Christ. Believe in him and submit to him.

God says this to people who are dead in their sins. He tells dead sinners to believe and repent and not to wait and delay. The fact that we are dead in sin never means that we must wait for something to happen to us before we come. We come because God promises that if we believe in Jesus Christ we will be saved.

But that raises the problem, “How can we come if we are dead? How can we come if by nature we are unable to come?” The answer to this question has to do with the power of the Word of God. The clearest picture of how this works is the story of Jesus calling Lazarus out of the grave. Lazarus was dead. He had been in the grave for four days. There was no life in him. He was a corpse. The KJV says, “[B]y this time he stinketh.” But then Jesus commanded him to come out of the grave. “[H]e cried out with a loud voice, Lazarus, come out” (John 11:43). And Lazarus obeyed. He obeyed because it was Christ who had called him. Christ created the universe by speaking. The word of Christ brings the dead to life.

This is a wonderful picture of what happens when a dead sinner is brought to life. God brings us to life by his powerful word. Paul in Romans 1:16 says that the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes....” Peter says to believers that God “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). And in 1 Peter 1:23 he says also to believers, “[Y]ou have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.”

The same God who created the world by speaking, brings sinners from death to life by that same powerful word. He speaks in the Bible. He speaks in the gospel. He speaks through the preaching of the gospel. And when God is going to save someone, that word comes with the power that raises the dead. He calls them “out of darkness into his marvelous light.” They are born again by “the living and abiding word of God.”

How do you know that God has called you in this powerful way? You know it by the fruit in your life – by faith, by conviction of sin, by a hunger and thirst after righteousness, by a longing for fellowship with God. In 1 John 3:9 John writes, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.”

This is very important. On the one hand we confess that salvation is by grace alone. It must be by grace alone because before we are saved, we are dead in sin and trespasses. When God saves someone, he brings a spiritual dead person to spiritual life. We are completely passive at that point. And yet in our experience we are active. We become aware of our need of the forgiveness and renewal and what Jesus has earned for us. We hear the gospel and we respond to it in faith and repentance. God calls us to faith and obedience and we must obey. We are involved in all of that. But we must always remember that if we are believing and if we are fighting sin in our lives, the ultimate reason is not the decisions that we make, but the secret powerful work of God through the word bringing us from death to life.

So, we have been speaking about the beginning of salvation. It is by grace alone because we are in no position to contribute to our own salvation because we are dead in sin. So, by grace alone God brings us from death to life. But we must take this one step further. Our ongoing spiritual life and spiritual growth and obedience is also by grace alone.

We are no longer dead in sin if we are believers. God has given us spiritual life. But even so the only way that we can live the Christian life is by grace alone. We cannot take one step apart from the on-going grace and power of God. We can never act independently of the grace of God in the Christian life. Jesus teaches this clearly in John 15. This is

the passage in which Jesus teaches that he is the true vine and that his people are the branches. Listen to what Jesus says in verses 4-5 of John 15: "4Abide in me, and I in you. **As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.** 5I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for **apart from me you can do nothing.**"

Notice that Jesus says that "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself" and "apart from me you can do nothing." The only way that we can produce the fruit of obedience in our lives is by abiding in the vine so that the life of the vine flows into us. On our own we can do nothing. We need the on-going life from Jesus through the Holy Spirit in order to produce any fruit to the glory of God. So even though we are active in the Christian life, the principle of by grace alone still applies. We cannot believe independently of God. We cannot live independently of God. We cannot produce any fruit independently of the power of the risen Christ working in us.

Paul expresses this idea very clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:10. "10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

Paul was a very zealous believer and servant of Jesus. He worked harder than all the other apostles in his service to Christ. And yet he takes no credit for himself. Every single thing that he did, he did by the grace of God. Even though he worked harder than anyone else, he insists, "it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Salvation is by the grace of God alone. We begin dead in sin. We are brought from death to life. But even when we become active, believing and serving the Lord, it is always by the grace of God. It is always God working through us. All that we do, we do by the grace of God.

And so, there is never any reason for us to boast in ourselves. The Bible speaks of boasting but it is always boasting in the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul writes, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"

And all of this comes to us through Jesus Christ. Grace is unmerited favor and unmerited blessing. We are spiritually dead by nature because of sin. Death is the penalty of sin. So, when God removes the penalty of sin, it is only because that penalty has been paid. That is the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus rose again because he exhausted the penalty of sin. And so, the grace by which we are saved is a grace that comes to us through what Jesus did on our behalf. There would be no grace apart from Jesus. Jesus and his life, death and resurrection is at the heart of the grace of God.

But so is God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. God the Father sent Christ to be the sacrifice for sin. God the Holy Spirit is the divine agent through whom the Father and the Son raise us from the dead and empower us for the Christian life. Salvation by grace alone is a work of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

“By Grace Alone.” It is a slogan that humbles us as all the 5 *solas* do. It means that we can take no credit for salvation. We are recipients of grace every step of the way. There is never any reason for us to boast in ourselves. There is never any reason to point to ourselves as worthy of praise and recognition. We have nothing that we did not receive. We are what we are because of the grace of God. Anything that we achieve that is good is the result of the grace of God in our lives.

And one of the wonderful effects of the grace of God in our lives is that we come to see this as a reason for celebration and rejoicing. There is something very sweet about pointing away from ourselves and acknowledging that all the credit and all the glory belongs to God. There is something deeply satisfying about confessing with Paul, “[B]y the grace of God I am what I am.” To seek glory for ourselves is natural for us because of our sinful natures, but it is ultimately empty and hollow and unsatisfying. We were not made for that. We were not saved for that. We were made for the glory of another. We fulfill our purpose by pointing away from ourselves to give glory to God.

And so, as sinners saved by grace there is something sweet about reviewing these great biblical truths that put us in our place and give glory to God. We rejoice in a salvation for which we can take no credit. We rejoice in a salvation which was necessary because we are unworthy

and totally helpless. We rejoice to confess that without God we can do nothing. We rejoice in all these things because it puts the focus where it belongs – on the God who alone is worthy of glory. Salvation is by grace alone. Thanks be to God.