

## ***Sola Gratia***

Dear friends: *grace*, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. In our Lenten devotions we've been looking at the "Sola's" of the Reformation. Thus far we've considered Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone as the Church's only the source of authority and divine truth; and then last week we focused on Sola Fide, Faith alone as the only way in which the Lord reckons sinners righteous in his sight and therefore heirs of salvation and eternal life. We are saved not by what we do, but rather by what we believe about Jesus and his redeeming work on our behalf. Our works play no part in it. Whatever good works we do perform as Christians are the fruit of saving faith that do indeed help our neighbors; but they in no way contribute to our standing before God.

This evening we turn our attention to the third of the big three "Sola's" that were the battle cry of the Reformation, which is Sola Gratia, Grace alone. And if as I said last week Sola Fide is the issue that was the lifeblood of the Reformation, then Sola Gratia was the beating heart that made it go.

The good news here (on the surface, at least) was that all parties involved in the Reformation agreed that the grace of God is necessary for salvation. Everyone said that no one can be saved without it. The bad news however is that the parties in contention disagreed on what the grace of God actually *is* and whether the grace of God is *sufficient* for salvation.

Drawing their definition from Scripture (alone), the reformers insisted that the grace of God is his unmerited favor. It is kindness from God that we don't deserve in any way. There is nothing we have done, nor can ever do to earn this favor. This comes through loud and clear in the readings from Deuteronomy. We ask, why did God choose the nation of Israel to be his special people and to bring the Savior into the world through their ancestral line? The answer is stated: it's not because they were stronger, more moral, more numerous, or better in any other way than the rest of the nations. In fact, one could argue that in many ways the Israelites were manifestly worse than the others by almost every standard of measurement, consistently stubborn, rebellious, and faithless. And that's rather the point: they were the least deserving. God chose them to underscore and highlight his grace. It's the same reason he chose Saul the Pharisee and persecutor of the Church to be his most prolific and successful evangelist. By choosing the least likely candidate, God shows that his grace and salvation are for all.

The Roman Church works with an entirely different understanding of grace. Instead of being simply unmerited favor, they say that grace is a supernatural power that God infuses into sinful humans that enables them to do things that sinners otherwise are unable to do. The analogy I like to use is Popeye's spinach. Without it, the bad guy always beats him up and takes his girlfriend, Olive Oil. Ah, but when Popeye downs a can of spinach, he suddenly has the strength of ten men. He fights like Samson when he's full of the Spirit and he wins the day. In the Roman system of theology, grace works sort of like that. No sinner on his own can do something worthy of merit before God, but if you add grace then he can. And that's what the sacraments are for: they are delivery vehicles for God's grace. Baptism gives a person the grace to believe in the Gospel and become a child of God. It's the shot in the arm that allows a person to come to faith. Confession and Absolution gives a person the grace to work off the temporal penalty of his sins by performing the satisfaction prescribed by the priest – that is a task or obligation to complete in order to seal the deal. In sacramental marriage God gives the grace for a person to be a good husband or wife and to earn spiritual credits while doing it. In ordination, God gives the grace to a man to be able to transform the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper into the body and blood of Christ. And so on.

In the reformer's view of grace, our salvation relies on divine *monergism*, that is God working alone. And because God is the one doing everything, we can be sure that it's all taken care of. Done. Complete. Perfect. You can be certain of it.

In the Roman view of grace, salvation involves *synergism*, that is, God and man working together to pull it off. And you can see the problem with that: when salvation is in part up to you, the focus is always turned to you and your part. Sure, you need God's *help* in the way of infused grace, but then it's still always up to you to take that grace and run with it. The result is a horrible confusion of Law and Gospel. And whenever that happens, the Law takes over. That in turn inevitably leads believers to the sin of smug self-righteousness or to the utter despair of doubting that they can ever be saved.

Another theological problem in the Roman view of grace is where is located the power of God that operates in the world: it's in this mystical substance the Church dispenses called grace, not where Scripture locates it: in Word of God itself. So, for example, they say that when one of their priests consecrates the elements for Holy Communion transforming them into Christ's body and blood, he can do it because he has the grace or power of ordination. And they say that since I don't have the grace of ordination in the Roman Church, when I or any of our pastors say the words of institution, nothing happens. God's Word has no effect. So, unless you're a former Catholic, you have never actually received Christ's body and blood while taking Communion. And when I say that your sins are forgiven, they're not.

By now I'm sure you see that this question of what grace is and whether it is sufficient is not just an academic argument among theologians who have too much time on their hands. No, it directly affects your assurance of salvation. It did back at the time of the Reformation, and it does so today. And once again, sadly, some of the church bodies that are heirs with us of the Reformation have circled back and now deny that salvation is by grace alone. They do it with what is called "Decision Theology".

It goes to the question of conversion: how does one first come to saving faith in the Gospel? In Decision Theology (the technical term is Arminianism) conversion is an act of the human will. I tell you about Jesus and what he did for you, and you decide whether to accept it. Saving faith is something you create in yourself all on your own. And here's the problem: since faith is your part – your work, if you will – you're always left wondering if your faith is good or strong enough. Well, how would you make that evaluation? You can't see your faith. Ah, but you know that saving faith produces good works. So, if you examine your life and see yourself never sinning and doing lots of good deeds, your faith must be strong. You're saved. If not, if you see sin and few good works, well, do the math: it looks like you're headed for hell. This is why the church bodies that follow this theology tend to be very revivalistic. They're always having to fire up their people and get them to decide again for Jesus because last time's decision didn't seem to stick.

But what does the Scripture say? "By grace you have been saved through faith. And *this* not of your own doing; it is the gift of God." Saving faith is a gift that God grants through the working of his Holy Spirit when his powerful Word is proclaimed. It's his work in you, not your work. Elsewhere Paul writes "When you were dead in your sins and trespasses, God made you alive with Christ." People dead in sin can't decide for Jesus. The dead are just that: dead. They can't do anything. If they come to life, it has to be all God's work. In that there is complete assurance. And this is why we must continue to insist with the reformers that salvation is by grace alone; for if it involves us in any way, then grace would no longer be grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***