

Sola Gratia ***Ephesians 2:1-10***

We are in week 3 of our series of messages we calling “The Five Solas”, a word that means “only”. We’re remembering back to 500 years ago when God raised up men and women who called the church back to the main pillars of biblical faith, to the things that all believers in Jesus believe. Those pillars of truth have been boiled down to five statements that we are looking at week by week here at LAC:

- #1 -- Sola Scriptura – Only Scripture is our final authority for what we believe and how we live.
- #2 -- Sola Fide – It is “only by faith” that we can be rescued from sin and made right with God.

On this 3rd week, we come to Sola Gratia – “Only by the grace of God.” We declare that it is only by God’s grace that sinful people can be forgiven and made right with God.

So, today, we focus on God’s grace. To guide us, we turn to Eph 2:1-10, which is all about the grace:

- **2:5** – “by grace you have been saved...”
- **2:7** – “the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus...”
- **2:8** – “by grace you have been saved...”

I can imagine a few of you thinking, “Oh, good. We get to talk about grace. It’s such a wonderful and safe topic with nothing at all convicting or negative.” But, I wonder how safe it is. Mostly, I wonder how many of us who go to church really have grasped what the grace of God is all about. For example, in this passage, God’s grace is supposed to change our lives. In v.2, the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, was convinced that anyone of us who have genuinely experienced God’s grace will no longer be able to live as we used to.

It’s clear to me that the message of God’s grace, of sola gratia, should thrill your soul and change your life. If it’s not, it may be that you have not yet grasped what the grace of God is all about. Maybe we need to take a few steps back and simply define what “grace” means in Ephesians 2.

What God’s Grace Is – *a free gift that 1) you cannot live without but 2) have no way to get on your own.*

In v.8, the Bible calls salvation by grace through faith a gift from God. What is a gift? It’s something you haven’t paid for yourself; something you haven’t earned through your efforts. A gift is free.

I’ve heard it put this way: Grace is mercy, not merit. Grace is the opposite of karma, which is all about getting what you deserve. Grace is getting what you don’t deserve, and *not* getting what you do deserve. Grace is fundamentally about God: his un-coerced initiative and extravagant demonstrations of care and favor that are offered to all people, accessed through faith in Jesus.

But, there is something that is different about this gift of God from most gifts we are given. Most of the gifts we have been given, even the most cherished ones, do not necessarily transform our lives. **One reason for this is that most gifts are not absolutely essential to our survival.** I mean – gifts you might receive, like socks or video games, etc., may be good gifts but you can live without them. **And the second reason some gifts are more life-transforming is that you don’t have the resources to get them on your own.**

In Eph 2:1-10, the Bible draws upon those two qualities of a life changing gift and shows us how precious God’s grace is: 1) that we can’t live without it (2:1-3) and 2) that we can’t get it on our own (2:4-7).

We Cannot Live without God’s Grace (2:1-3) *As for you, you were dead...*

In the opening phrase of v.1, the Bible gives us a stark and precise statement about what is wrong with us, i.e., “you were dead”. This diagnosis is counter to the way our culture discusses human problems. In our world, we usually think about our problems being more of a sickness, a physical, emotional or moral sickness.

There are, of course, degrees of being sick and a variety of ways to treat those who are sick. If you are both emotionally and physically sick, you might need care from a psychiatrist. If you have more of an addictive problem, you might seek a cure by going on a retreat that includes therapy and medicines. If your problem isn’t so serious, you might be told you simply need more sleep or a better diet. The point is that, if your problem is a sickness, you do things that can contribute to your healing.

But, if your problem is that you’re dead, you can’t do anything about that. There are no degrees of deadness; no dead people who are more dead than other dead people. If you’re dead, you don’t need medicine or therapy. You need a resurrection! There are no classes at med school that teach a doctor how to do that!

The hard part about this truth about us, i.e., that we are dead, is that all of us who have come to church today feel alive. Right? And we are alive, i.e., physically. To be alive physically means to be alive to sensations in this world. We can respond to physical stimuli with our five senses. We can touch and taste and hear and see and smell. So, how can the Bible say so brazenly that, in our normal state, we are dead?

The Bible consistently talks about two kinds of life – and it talks about two kinds of death. You can be alive physically but dead spiritually. That means, there are realities that you, on your own, are not alive to; not able to respond to. Most importantly, there is a God who is not seen by physical eyes. Indeed, there is an entire spiritual reality that, when you are born physically, you are not alive to. So, you may intuitively think that there must be a God – but you don't know him. You don't experience him. You are not alive to him.

The Bible declares from the beginning to the end that you and I were made to know God personally. In fact, the most important thing in your life is to know God and live in relationship to him. When I say that, do you see the problem that Eph 2 addresses? You were made to know God. Nothing else in this world is quite right when you don't know God. And, the problem is not just that you're sick. You're dead to the only one who can bring meaning into your life.

The result is that, without God, we still look for meaning and joy and fulfillment in life. But, we look for it in all the wrong places! We try to find it, as v. 2 says, in the "ways of the world". When human beings are dead to God, we try to find real life, as v. 3 says it, by gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature..." And, we don't know where to find what it is that we're missing. According to the Bible, living without a relationship with God inevitably leads us into self-directed thoughts, words and actions that are wrong.

This is all summed up in **v.3**: *All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.* Who is in that "all"? Are you? Of course, you are – and so am I.

The Bible says that apart from God doing something for us, we're all spiritually dead. The result is that we all engage in transgressions and sins. We don't live as God has made us to live. God's wrath is directed against all that is evil and unjust in this world. And... we've all engaged in trespasses and sins! So, we are not ready to meet God. We're in big danger – eternal danger.

Being "dead", you and I cannot do anything about this on our own. Dead things have no power to make themselves alive. This is the reality you have to own if you will understand what the word "grace" means. As Paul put it, "we are without hope in this world."

We cannot afford what we need without God's grace (2:4-7) *God... made us alive with Christ even when we were dead.*

In these deeply moving verses, 2:4-7, we first are told why God has chosen to make available to us what we absolutely have not earned and we do not deserve. **V. 4** simply says, "*Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy made us alive...*" So, on the basis of God's Word, I want to declare to you right now that, no matter what you have done and no matter what you have brought with you to church today, God loves you with an everlasting love. Because of that, God is ready to give you the most important thing that you need in your life – and you need only receive it by faith. You have no resources on your own to be able to obtain this. God offers life to you sola gratia, by his grace alone.

What I want you to see is the way the Apostle Paul wrote about how costly it was for God to offer us forgiveness of sins and a new life as a free gift. But, it was not free to him. I want you to look closely at the three parallel phrases telling us about what God's grace led him to do:

- **V.5 – God made us alive with Christ.** Because of our sin, we were dead to God, with no personal relationship to him. But, through faith in Jesus, we are "born again", i.e., made alive.
- **V.6 – God raised us up with Christ.** We were not left in that old dead way of life but raised up to live life the way God created us to live, i.e., the way that Jesus lived.
- **V.7 – God seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms.** God has seated us in heaven alongside Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead in this eternal family of God.

There are **two things I want you to notice about each of those three phrases.** **The first** is that each of the three wonderful things that has happens to us when we place our faith in Jesus is said to happen "with Christ".

It means that there is a union that happens when we follow Jesus. Paul put it this way in Gal 2:20: “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*”

The **second thing** to see is that all the things we read that God has done for us “with Christ” are in the past tense. Our being made alive to God, our new life lived powered by the resurrection power of Jesus, and even our eternal placement alongside Jesus Christ in heaven are all said to have already happened. Of course, in our own daily lives, we know that all that has not yet happened. But, in the eyes of God, he declares that it is all so certain that it is as if it has all already been completed.

I know that this is difficult to understand fully – although it certainly is wonderful. Let me try to boil it down for you: The moment you believe in Jesus, you become united with him and indwelt by God’s Spirit. You are so united to him that your complete remaking is as sure that it’s as if it has already happened. God will most surely finish what he has started to do in your life. This means that everything that Jesus has done and everything that Jesus deserves become yours. You are as loved and accepted by God as Jesus’ actions deserve. Your sins are gone. Your future as one fully complete in Christ is assured. Hallelujah!

One implication: But, you must know this too. If you are so united with Christ that you get everything Jesus deserves, then he is so united with you that he got everything you deserve. **2 Cor 5:21** sums it up: “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

So, we all deserve death, both physical and spiritual, because of our sins. On the cross, Jesus took our place, identified with us, so that we now might live through union with him. We could never afford this salvation on our own. Ephesians 2 sums this up by simply saying twice (v.5 & v.8), “*It is by grace you have been saved.*” It is “sola gratia” – by God’s grace alone.

We cannot experience God’s grace, and remain the same. (2:8-10) *We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works...*

Eph 2:1-10 begins by telling us as Jesus-followers that there was a way we “used to live” before Christ. And, it ends by telling us that, once we place our faith in Jesus, we become God’s handiwork. The word that is used there is “poiema”, the basis for our word poem. I find it beautiful. When we receive God’s gift of salvation that comes to us “by grace through faith”, we become God’s work of art. God promises to recreate us so that we might live beautiful lives, lives that serve others as Jesus did, and lives that do the good work that God intended for us before sin entered the world and became a part of our lives. So, if we’ve experienced God’s grace, our lives should be changing in those directions – right?

This transformed life is a work of God’s grace. When you truly experience the grace of God in your heart, it will begin to direct your thinking, guide your life, and open your eyes to see the world as God sees it. How does this happen? Paul writes in this passage, that **the foundational change that grace brings about in us, the thing that re-directs everything else, is that it takes away boasting. Those of us who know that our salvation required the death of the sinless Son of God can no longer be proud.**

You see, the problem that led to Paul writing the letter to the Ephesians was that both Jews and Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. But, the new Jewish Jesus-followers and Gentile Jesus-followers did not want to be in one church family together. Paul is saying here that the reason for this division among people was their pride. The Jews felt they were better than these worldly Gentiles because they were God’s chosen people. The Gentiles thought they were better than the Jews because – well, sadly, they were as anti-Semitic as many people throughout history have been. In our day, we would probably say, “The answer to that problem is easy, i.e., just form two churches so that they don’t have to tolerate one another – one for Jews and the other for non-Jews.” But, the Bible says, “No!” Paul is basically writing in this text, “Yes, the answer to this problem of your not wanting to worship together is easy. But it’s not that you should have two churches. The answer is grace.” Grace means the end of boasting. Grace tears down the proud divisions that separate people from people.

This life-changing power of “sola gratia” is something that **English reformer Thomas Brooks** wrote about to his church in the 17thC in his book *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*. Brooks said that, before coming to Christ, we get our sense of identity and worth out of putting ourselves first and putting down those different from us. And, he wrote specifically about socio-economic differences. Apparently, in his church,

people from all economic classes were coming to faith in Jesus but were not welcoming one another across those class divisions into the church.

Pastor Brooks spoke of the poor, the middle-class and the rich in the church. He said the poor despise the middle-class and the rich because they blamed wealthier people's self-centered and uncaring actions as the reason for their own poverty. Brooks said the middle class despise both the poor and the rich: the poor because they claimed they hadn't worked hard and the rich because they claimed they hadn't earned their wealth but had been born into it. And, he wrote, the rich despise the middle class and poor because they claimed both were unrefined and don't know how to live with what they had. Brooks drew upon the message of "sola gratia", we are all saved by God's grace alone, in Ephesians 2. He proclaimed, just as Paul had proclaimed, that when we experience the grace of God made available only because of the death of Jesus, all boasting must be cast away. Grace takes away boasting.

I believe we need a book like *Precious Remedies against Satan's Devices* for our day. How will the divisions in our own world between younger and older generations, immigrants and citizens, Republican and Democrat, rich and poor, and all the racial divisions ever be reconciled? How will all those who have come into one unexpected family through faith in Jesus ever show this divided world that there is one God and one Lord who is over all? Like the Apostle Paul and Rev Thomas Brooks, I believe the answer is "sola gratia", only by grace. The only thing that will make it possible for a church as diverse as ours to glorify God through our unity is that we all must be humbled by the grace of God.

When we live as if we are "our own", i.e., that we don't desperately need the mercy of God, then we too look down on others different from us. We get our identity by doing it. We too can pray, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, "I thank you Lord that I'm not like that other person over there." We look down on others. But, when grace meets us, we get our identity only by looking up to the only one who could have boasted. But, when we look up at Jesus, we see that he who was in very nature God, but was willing to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for us, even die for us (Phil 2:5-11).

Grace is God's tool to make you his work of art. When you experience grace, you will find it spells the end of boasting, the end of bitterness, the end of fearing someone else will get ahead of you, the end of perfectionism – of not measuring up, the end of comparing yourself to other people, and the end of excluding people because they're not good enough.

Has your life been changed by grace? Have you received his grace – humbly, joyfully? "For it is by God's grace that you are saved, through faith. And that is not of yourself. It is the gift of God lest anyone should boast." At the heart of all we believe is "sola gratia" – only by the grace of God.