

Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)

Titus 3:3-8

INTRODUCTION

It was the summer of 1505, a 21 year old law student was returning to school when a thunderstorm rolled in and changed the course of his life. A lightning bolt flashed quite near him, and he cried out in terror “Help, St. Anne! I’ll become a monk!” Martin Luther survived the storm, and he kept his promise – becoming an Augustinian monk, to his father’s great disappointment. As a faithful monk, peace with God still eluded him.

Like many people of his day, Luther saw God the Father primarily as a Fearful and Disapproving Judge. Jesus was a Holy and Distant Savior. Mary, however, she was human (and not divine) and as a woman, more naturally could be expected to take pity on us. But even Mary, who was considered a perpetual virgin and even sinless, was still too removed for most people. So the Saints were a bridge to get to Mary, who then could influence her Son to have mercy upon us. St. Anne was the imagined name of Mary’s mother – and it is to St. Anne that Luther cried out for help.

In such a religious system, prayers to the saints, pilgrimages to shrines or sites that housed holy relics from the martyrs made sense. It was in the time just before Martin Luther, that the Rosary was developed. It was a beaded necklace that anyone could afford, and it functioned like a relic of their own. Prayers could be counted, and merit could thus be accumulated – reassuring the faithful penitents.

It was through these prayers and pilgrimages, and by receiving communion, giving to the church, sponsoring prayers and Masses to be said for you or your loved ones, (or by purchasing indulgences), and also through good works performed for others – all of this was how one could earn favor from God and merit additional grace. And if

the Saints heard our prayers, they may share some of their bonus merits for us too.

This thought of the day was: “God will not deny grace to those who do what they can.” All of this was needed because after death they surely would have to expect a long period of suffering in Purgatory before ever hoping to reach heaven.

It is against this backdrop that we come to our topic for today’s sermon. We have seen the Reformers held that **Scripture alone** was the sole authority for faith and practice. And Scripture, they found, put forth **Christ alone** as the Savior – it said nothing about praying to the Saints or Mary. And even more than that, Scripture taught that grace was not something that we could earn. Instead it was unmerited favor that God bestowed upon us solely from his kindness and love toward us on the basis of Christ. It was **Grace Alone** that could save us – not grace coupled with human merit.

READ Titus 3:3-8

Before going straight to the text however, I want to set the stage with some background as to the nature of Grace in Scripture.

I. What is Grace?

A. Definitions

1. Unmerited favor
2. Gods Riches At Christ’s Expense
3. “The free favour of God... conferred... upon the unworthy”
(William Newman – 19th Century Baptist)

B. Grace vs. Mercy

1. Mercy is God not giving us what we deserve – overlooking our sins.
2. Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve – blessing in spite of our rebellion.

3. Both terms relate to God's lovingkindness.

C. Grace in the Bible

1. Grace can refer to God giving us the Gospel, giving us the opportunity to receive salvation, giving us the ability to respond, or even enabling us to believe (more later).
2. Sometimes Grace is a term used for the Gospel or the work God is doing – esp. in Acts (14:26, 15:11, 20:24).
3. Grace is also a special “grace” or “enabling” to do what we know is right, or to withstand a trial.

II. The Salvation that Grace Brings – Titus 3:3-7

A. The “Need” for Salvation – v. 3

1. The condition of humanity is described here – we all are slaves to sin, totally depraved and fallen. Sin comes naturally and we “pass our days in malice and envy.”
2. The assumption here is that such a condition is worthy of judgment – and Scripture testifies to this abundantly – Eph. 5:5-6.

B. The “Provision” of Salvation – v. 4-5a

1. The appearing of God's goodness and lovingkindness parallels Titus 2:11 where it is described as “the grace of God” that has appeared.
2. God has no compulsion that makes him have to offer salvation to humanity – it is purely from his grace and mercy – which appeared when Jesus came and the Gospel was revealed.
3. Notice that “he saved us” – we know these words and take them for granted – but it is God in Christ who saved us. God himself intervening for us – what Grace indeed!

C. The “Basis” of Salvation – v. 5b, 6b

1. Now some make it seem that God was lonely and wanted people to love Him, so he created humanity and hopes that they accept his offer of salvation – then he can enjoy fellowship with them.
2. The truth we see here in Titus is that the people God bothered to save were not in any way deserving. They were hateful people – and enemies of God (Rom. 5:10).
3. Why did he save us then?
 - The Negative reason: not because of any works we did or could do in our own righteousness
 - The Positive reason: because of his own mercy (grace and love) for us.
4. This provision was also “through Jesus Christ our Savior” – this is not a throw-away line.

Martin Luther on this line: *“Through [Christ] grace and salvation are conferred upon you, he having rendered full obedience to all the commandments of God, and satisfied God's justice, in your stead and for you. Grace and salvation are conferred upon you because he is worthy. This is true Christian faith.... We receive absolution and grace at no cost or labor on our part, but not without cost and labor on the part of Christ.”*

D. The “Application” of Salvation – v. 5c, 6a

1. Salvation is applied through the Spirit and involves a “spiritual washing” – compare Eph. 5:26 “having cleansed [the church] by the washing of water with the word.”
2. The washing of regeneration is also the renewal of the Holy Spirit (renewal here is “being made new”)
3. This is the new birth, the new creation in us.

Martin Luther saw this as significant in his sermon on this passage in on Christmas Day in 1522: *“The thought is: It will not do to patch up, or mend, the life here and there with works. An entirely new disposition is necessary; the nature must be changed. Then works will follow spontaneously.”*

4. Baptism is not necessarily in view – instead the act that Baptism in part symbolizes.
5. Another description of this is “the Spirit was poured out on us richly” – hearkening back to Pentecost.
6. The spiritual birth and cleansing/renewal is an act that God the Holy Spirit does.

Martin Luther: *“The apostle terms this washing a ‘regeneration,’ a ‘renewing of the Holy Spirit,’ to fully express the power and efficacy of grace. This washing is a thing so vitally important it must be effected, not by a creature, but by the Holy Spirit. How completely, O holy Paul, thou dost reject the free will, the good works and the great merits of presumptuous saints! How high thou exaltest our salvation, at the same time bringing it so near to us! yes, even within ourselves.”*

E. The “End” of Salvation – v. 7

1. Salvation is experienced now, but it is not fully realized until we are experiencing eternal life – as heirs of Christ.
2. This hope is the end or goal to which salvation points.
3. God saved us to experience this joy in Him forever – and all of that is because of his kindness and grace.

Historical Sidebar: One of the earliest expressions of this joint faith held by the Reformers was a statement of faith discussed by key Reformers in October of 1529 in a city called Marburg, Germany. The Marburg Colloquy, as it was called, was a list of beliefs. Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, Philip Melancthon and six others met and agreed on all but one of the articles. Here is what they agreed to about salvation. See how sharply it contrasts with the Roman Catholic ideas we discussed just now:

Fifth, we believe that we are saved from [original] sin and all other sin and eternal death if we believe in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who died for us. Without this faith no [good] deed, social status, or religious order, etc., can free us from our sins.

Sixth, such faith is a divine gift which we cannot earn with works or merit nor create of our own accord. Rather, it comes from and is created by the Holy Spirit, wherever it pleases, when we hear the Gospel or the words of Christ.

Seventh, such faith is our justification before God, on which basis he accounts us saved, pious, and holy without works or merit. We are thereby saved from sin and death, granted mercy and made holy for the sake of his Son, in whom we believe. Thus, we are allowed to take part in and enjoy the Son’s salvation, life, and all things.

This statement formed the basis for the 1530 Augsburg Confession, still officially held by the Lutheran Church today – although they do not always abide by the spirit of this.

APPLICATION: There may be some here who are misled by the Catholic religion or another religion – even the Lutheran church has strayed from Luther’s stance on the Gospel. Some people find hope in the rituals and the works they do for others. They believe that “God helps those who help themselves.” They are not sure that they are heirs of eternal life – they hope they are. They hope their good works will outweigh their evil deeds. No, they don’t believe in purgatory, but they still aren’t sure of salvation.

Perhaps there are kids here who understand that God (and their parents) want them to obey and be good. They take in their parents efforts to obey and worship. They learn which verses tell them to obey and what they must do. They try hard but have no peace. They hope they are a good kid but they know they make mistakes too. They are not sure of their salvation. To them, obedience = salvation and acceptance. [This is a warning to us parents here as well!]

If you are a child who thinks that way or an adult who is trusting in their morality to be accepted by God, I hope you see that religion or obedience cannot save you. Being good cannot save you. Jesus Christ alone can save you, by His grace alone. Just believe in the Gospel, believe in Jesus – and seek out someone to learn more about saving grace.

III. The Sanctification that Grace Brings – Titus 3:8 (with 2:11-14)

A. Good works – 3:8

- Works don’t earn salvation but flow from it naturally.

Ulrich Zwingli: *“Where there is true faith, works necessarily result, just as fire necessarily brings with it heat.”*

- See Eph. 2:7-10 – parallel with Titus = good works flow from salvation from free grace
- Rom. 12:6 “gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...”
- 2 Cor. 9:8 “And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

B. Training on How to Live – 2:11-13

C. Purified People – 2:14

- Jesus wants a holy people – and he is the One who makes them holy.

APPLICATION: Scriptural teaching on Sanctification is that it flows from an appreciation of salvation being not earned. This directly opposes the spirit of Legalism (a modern day problem that parallels Roman Catholic teaching of Luther’s day).

C.J. Mahaney defines Legalism in his book *The Cross Centered Life*:

Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God.

This is not often directly stated but rather lived out in practice. We think of God as approving of us in direct relation to how well we keep our act together (doing the things expected of us). When we have a good week, we feel confident and joyous in worship. When we have a week of failure, we can’t lift our head up in worship. This is ultimately sanctification by works. In practice we are acting as if our acceptance by God is only through our merit. But it is “Not according to works done by us in righteousness” that we are accepted – but by the grace of God. Our works should flow from a joyous experience of God’s forgiveness based on Christ – not from a burdensome obligation or duty. If you find yourself burdened, look back to the Savior “whose burden is light.” Spend time reminding yourself of the Gospel – and be taught by grace – 2:11.

IV. The Sovereignty which Brings Grace – Tit. 1:1-2 (with Eph. 1:3-5, 11; Acts 18:27; Rom. 11:5-6)

A. Historically, there is more to say about the Reformers and “Grace”.

1. Martin Luther saw the condition of humanity as so fallen, that even his free will was bound to his evil nature and desires. He wrote about this in his famous book *The Bondage of the Will*.
2. John Calvin likewise emphasized the role of God’s election when it comes to salvation.
3. The Reformers were recovering historic doctrine taught by Augustine & others, & found ultimately in Scripture.
4. Not all the Reformers agreed with Luther and Calvin on this.
5. Still, the Presbyterians and the Reformed Church, along with a majority of Baptists came to hold to what we now call “Sovereign Grace.”

B. “Sovereign Grace” is the grace that determines beforehand that we will be children of God.

- “Sovereign Grace” is the grace that enables us to believe.
- We see this hinted at in Titus 1:1-2, and Eph. 1:3-5, 11.
- Scripture support for this is found in Acts 18:27b “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed”
- Rom. 11:5-6a “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works.”
- Also see teaching on Election and God’s call in other passages – John 6, Rom. 8 and 1 Cor. 1 among others.
- Our church’s “Elder Affirmation of Faith” holds this view.

- Suffice it to say that this view magnifies God’s grace even more. God graciously gives us the faith to believe.
- The Reformers at the Marburg Colloquy did not agree completely on sovereign grace and election yet despite those differences, they did agree that salvation is by grace through faith alone – as we saw earlier.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to share a superb quote from a Swiss Reformer named Rudolf Gwalther, who worked closely with Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich in the mid-1500s. He is commenting on Paul’s final blessing in Gal. 6:18: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.”

Paul prays that the Galatians will have grace, that is to say, the free favor of God, which he bestows on us in his Son in order to remind us again of the source of our salvation and call us back from the superstitious observance of legal ceremonies that the false apostles were forcing on them. His desire is that grace should be with their spirit, that is, that it should so penetrate their minds and that they should be so well-grounded in it that they may go on and be strengthened in their faith and bear witness to it in their behavior. It is not enough to glory in the grace of God and confess Christ as Lord and Savior; we must also reflect his Spirit and live lives worthy of our profession.

I say amen to that, may we all live godly lives through the power of the grace that God provides to us richly in Christ Jesus.