

Sola Gratia—Grace Alone

Trinity CRC, October 29, 2017 AM
Series: *Five Solas* (with Pastor Michael)

Ephesians 2:1-10
Rev. Richard deLange
Lord's Supper

Dear family of God,

In our Bible reading, Paul speaks of a road we used to walk on. Verses 1 and 2 have been translated in this way:

Eph 2:1 So where do you come into it all? Well, you were dead because of your offences and sins! 2 That was the road you used to travel, keeping in step with this world's 'present age'; in step, too, with the... people whose whole lives consist of disobeying God.

Take an imaginary step with me for a moment down a visual road. And as you do, I'm going to use pictures of Wittenberg, Germany that were taken by the Hofstede family who travelled there this past summer. And we'll have a little fun with them for a few moments, but the message is a serious one nonetheless.

Picture yourself walking down the narrow road of Wittenberg in the early 1500s. It's a busy city. A university city. It's where Martin Luther is professor of theology and where he's been busy studying the Bible and coming to some fresh and important discoveries about God and our salvation.

You wind through the streets with your family. You cling to one another as you get closer to the city centre. You can't miss the church, the most powerful institution in the world of that day.

Those steeples rise high above every other building in town. That was intentional. The tall steeples point you to heaven. They force you to look up. They make you recognize your smallness. And if you are so small compared to that building, how small you must be in the sight of Almighty God who is worshipped in that church.

And when you enter inside, you feel still smaller. You are surrounded by glorious light shining through stained glass windows. Gold glistens from the cross, the Eucharist table and the chandeliers. The majestic marble-clad pillars gleam with beauty and strength. The spires above the Table say, "Look up to God where we are pointing." In addition, you are surrounded by larger than life statues of the saints who have lived before you and to whom you can only hope to aspire. The best you can do is pray to them to help you get to eternal life. This is the sort of awe and fear that filled Martin Luther and people like him in the church 500 years ago.

As you leave the church, you return to the hard world. Soldiers walk the streets. People leave with as much uncertainty of their own salvation as when they entered. Some have even less because they cannot afford the indulgences the local priest is asking for to remove the guilt of your sins.

Back in the streets, your children stare at the temptations of the world. As a father, you feel the burden of your own soul. You carry the eternal security of your children as if you were carrying them on your own back! And your wife and mother. Where is she? Oh, she's taking the pictures!

Okay. I had fun with the Hofstede's pictures. But the message is a serious one. 500 years ago in Europe, people who attended church regularly, who confessed to be Christians, lived without hope for their eternal well being. There was no way to be certain of your eternal security in relation to Almighty God whose church building you entered. You lived in fear of him,

for he alone held the keys to heaven for you. And there was no way you could measure up. There was no way to know whether you were on God's good side or his bad side, if you were loved or even hated.

So today we celebrate the Reformation for what it brought back to people. No, we don't celebrate the fact that the Reformation led to the formation of new Christian denominations. But we must celebrate that the gospel was recovered. We must celebrate that by grace the weight of uncertainty from our sin and our insecurity about our place in heaven have been lifted from our backs. We are free. But not because of anything we've done. We are free from sin by grace alone.

Grace to Cover Sin

We are saved by grace which covers our sin. I know, you've heard it before. I hope you hear it just about every Sunday. But because you have heard it so much, it may not seem that amazing to you anymore. It should! But does the grace of God amaze you?

It does when we realize what it saves us from.

Reading through Ephesians 2 this week stood in sharp contrast to a radio program I was listening to as I drove home from the Elder's Meeting on Wednesday night. We've all become accustomed to hearing the regular LBGTQ categories in our society. We are told over and over again that these are normative identities. Our premier chastised people this week who think there is a problem with this.

Earlier this week I noticed one of you commenting about something on Facebook. It said it was true but I have a hard time believing it is. It was a story of this woman in Germany who identifies as—listen to this—a cat. I can't make that up. In her case, I don't think that's sinful. It's just strange. But back to listening to CBC as I was driving home. The speaker was talking about the broad spectrum of natural sexual orientations people can have in addition to LBGTQ. She talked about a person who just is not oriented to be committed to one person. So she may be married to a man but they have an open marriage; that allows her to go out and have a one night stand with other people when the need or the urge arises. Others have the desire to be married to more than one person and to love more than one person as a spouse. And those other lovers could be the same gender or a different one. The list of so-called orientations went on for the ten-minute drive. The new categories she was talking about used to be called sin or infidelity. But today these are just people expressing their true identify.

I am floored—but not really all that surprised—that we have people today trying to tell us that what we've historically considered to be sin is now another expression of love. NT Wright in his commentary on Ephesians 2 gets us back to that idea of walking down a road when he says,

We live in a world where human beings, left to themselves, not only choose the wrong direction, but remain cheerfully confident that it is in fact the right one. Indeed, people regularly point out, as evidence of its being the right one, how confident they are on the subject. It is, after all, a fine road, much travelled and in good repair.

But congregation, that's what our Bible reading says happens because of sin. Wright translates verses 3 and 4 from the Greek this way:

Eph 2:3 Actually, that's how all of us used to behave, (listen to this:) conditioned by physical desires. We used to do what our flesh and our minds were urging us to do. What was the result? We too were subject to wrath in our natural state, just like everyone else.

In our sinful nature, we just do what we feel like doing. Whatever comes naturally. But the problem is that not everything we naturally feel like doing is good because our desires have been corrupted by sin. "Simply following the desires of the physical body, and equally of the mind, will lead you to ruin."

That's the bad news. We're all guilty of sin. We all have a heavy weight of sin holding us down and penetrating to every part of us—body, mind, spirit, will and soul. But the good news is that God is rich in grace. And his grace is greater than all our sin. Paul gives this remarkable great news in v.4:

Eph 2:4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

We need grace from God to cover our sin. And it has been supplied through Christ's sacrifice of himself for us. Apart from Jesus we remain dead in our sin! Dead! That means we're spiritually unable to save ourselves. Spiritually unable to see our condition. Spiritually unwilling to look to Christ for salvation. Spiritually unwilling to follow Christ's design for life.

We desperately need God's grace to cover our sins. We need God's grace to even reach out for salvation. We can only be saved by God's grace alone. That's how bad our sin is. And that's how great God's grace is!

Resting in God's Grace

It is our privilege as God's people to know about God's grace, to trust him completely for our salvation. But then we must learn to rest in that grace.

Eph 2:8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Friends, a gift is free. When Pastor Michael was ordained a couple of weeks ago, he received several gifts up here. Before that service, Andrew did not go up to him and say, "I'm going to give you socks, but you'll have to pay for them later." And Harold did not say after the service, "Pastor Michael, I hope you enjoy that snow shovel and everything else we gave you, but you owe me \$100 for all of it." That didn't happen. No one asked for payment for those gifts. Gifts by their very nature are free. All we must do is receive them and then use them.

By *using* the gift of grace, I mean resting in it and living out of it. I've gotten gifts before that I didn't really want or had no need for. So they just sit on the shelf or collect dust until I either give them away or die. But that's a shame. A gift is meant to be received and used. It is intended to bless your life.

This was the life-changing discovery of Martin Luther. He read passages like today's text and it struck him over and over again that God's grace is amazing. It is not a half-measure, as he'd been taught all of his life. It isn't that God pays for some of your sin and you

have to cover the rest. He was taught that divine favour was more of a reward for good behaviour than a gift. So it radically changed Luther's life when he realized it is gift. Sin is all paid. Paid in full. Nothing is left but to enjoy the gift and its benefits.

So how do we enjoy the gift of God's grace to us? How do we rest in God's grace? Well, first of all, we should receive it with seriousness and gratitude. I've told you before that the first time I think I really understood grace was when I was praying for forgiveness of a certain sin for the umpteenth time as a teenager. And as I was kneeling beside by bed that evening, I felt in my heart like God gently hit me on the side of the head—as if to get my attention—and said, "Would you quit that now! I forgave you the first time you asked for forgiveness for that sin!" That's what God's grace is like. We know we're guilty and he freely forgives us! When Luther discovered grace, he said, "I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates." So you too, friends, receive this gift with all seriousness and sincere gratitude.

Secondly, living out of God's grace will happen more and more as you meditate on the gift. God did not just say, "I forgive you!" No, God said, "I love you even though you're a sinner. So I'll send my Son to pay for **your** sins!" Christ said, "I'm going to give my life up for you so that your sins will be covered fully and you can enjoy the gift of salvation freely." And the Holy Spirit said, "I'll come and warm your cold heart so that you can receive this gift and enjoy it." So, beloved, take time regularly to think about the things God did to give us salvation as a gift. Use the devotionals we've been providing throughout this Sola series to help you think more often about how wonderfully and fully we've been saved. Meditate on it!

Thirdly, when you feel sin clinging to you like prickly burrs on your socks after you've walked in the forest, sticking to you like peanut butter on the roof of your mouth, or hounding you like a recurring nightmare, go to Jesus. Go to Jesus. Run to Jesus. And hold on to him. Tell yourself the truth of our text today. Remind yourself through this powerful Scripture,
⁸ For it is by grace I have been saved, through faith—and this not from myself, it is the gift of God.
Throw that Scripture in the face of Satan who whispers in your ear, "God can't forgive *that* sin. You're not worthy. You're not sorry enough." Or whatever. Preach this glorious good news to yourself over and over. It is by grace alone that I've been saved. I don't have to do anything. I simply embrace Jesus!

I could go on. There's more ways you and I can learn to rest in God's amazing grace. But finally let me just say, "Come to the table today." In our tradition, we call the sacraments a means of grace. When we partake by faith, God's grace in some beautiful but mysterious way empowers us. Jesus comes to us in this meal to strengthen us. He reminds us in this meal that he is as close to us as the bread and the cup. He is in us and with us. He strengthens us spiritually like food and drink strengthen us physically. Come, he says, take of this means of grace. Remember and believe that I've paid for your sin. It is finished. I love you. I am with you and I always will be here for you!

You and I don't have to walk down the streets of Wittenberg. But we do walk down our own streets with our own sin-burdens. Friends, receive God's free gift of salvation in Christ. Receive Christ. He is the gift! And live out of his amazing grace and strength each day.