

Sola: Grace **Ephesians 2:8-9**

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Let's get right into our subject today as we continue our series on the Reformation sola doctrines that changed the world. Last week was Sola Scriptura; Scripture alone is the final and highest authority. Today is Sola Grace or grace alone. Scripture alone clarifies final authority. Grace alone deals with the all-important question of how we are saved from hell to eternal life—the very nature of the gospel.

Right there we see why the stakes on this are so high. They last forever and ever. Get the gospel wrong and you are damned and judged by God forever. Get it right and forever you experience the bliss of God's love and life. Anyone interested now?

This is the sad reality of the 16th century average person in Western Europe. The only church in town read a Bible to you in a language you didn't know. They held worship services that included rituals you were told contributed to your salvation. They urged you to do your best and hope that in the end you were justified before God. Thank you. Go home. Have a nice day. Maybe we will see you in heaven, but then again, maybe not.

Yet like us, those people longed to know with certainty that they were forgiven by God and had eternal life. Like us, they lived life with diseases and death all around them—even more than us. The plague would strike and wipe out entire villages. War was much more real and there were threatening armies on all sides. Death was a daily reality along with its question: what happens to me when I die?

But the church's answer was to do better and try harder. What's the problem with that? How do you ever know with any assurance that you have done enough or tried hard enough? No wonder indulgences sold like they did. It was a certificate of forgiveness. You held it in your hand. It was tangible. A tactile assurance from the church. Of course, it was bogus and unbiblical but when you don't have anything else, bogus will do.

God wants us to have assurance of salvation as long as it rests in the right place.

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Since we are going to be talking a lot about grace, let's begin by defining the term:

Grace = unmerited favor; the non-entitled saving kindness of God.

To understand saving grace you must understand race—as in the condition of the human race—before a holy God. Listen to the words here, "dead in trespasses," "sons of disobedience," "by nature children of wrath." Who is he talking about? The ne'er-do-wells of society? The criminals? The bullies on the playground of life? No. This is a summary statement of every human being. We are *all* spiritually dead in our sins.

The starting point of the gospel is the opposite of the basic understanding of human nature popular in society today. The contemporary starting point is that man is basically good and with the right upbringing and education and opportunities, he or she will be an upstanding contributor to society's goodness. Therefore, when someone steals, lies, or murders, it is a failure of society to nurture the good instead of the evil. The solution is educational opportunities or better healthcare or better parenting.

But the gospel doesn't say that we are good people who need nurturing; rather that we are by nature rebels against God. We are dead in our sin. Our basic nature is toward what is immoral and violent and depraved.

When we lie, steal, slander, abuse, or do violence, we are acting according to our nature. As image bearers we retain a moral compass and laws can restrain our lower nature desires. Yet, Scripture and human history point to a fundamental flaw that should restrain all our optimism about a heaven on earth created by us. The human race has a massive problem.

"As it is written:

*"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."* (Romans 3:10–12)

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

Sola Grace drives us first to our spiritual depravity and desperation apart from God's grace.

Secondly, Sola Grace says our attempts to win back God don't work. Why? Morally good things we do can't and won't win us favor with God.

*"We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.
We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."* (Isaiah 64:6)

Religion is man's attempt to claw his way back to God. But God has said, *"Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us."* (Titus 3:5 KJV)

Thankfully, Ephesians 2 doesn't stop with our depravity. Listen,

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:4-9)

Notice the repeated source of salvation. Verse 5, *"by grace you have been saved."* Verse 8, *"For by grace you have been saved."* Grace. Whose grace? Ours? No, verse 4, *"But God, being rich in mercy...made us alive with Christ."* The mercy of God toward us motivated

God's redemptive kindness toward us. Question, *was God under any moral obligation to do anything but give us what our sins deserve?* The biblical answer is no. If there was, then God's grace and mercy would not be Sola. It would be grace +. It would be grace and our goodness alone. Grace and our inherent value alone. How about this, grace and our earning it alone.

This was the issue of the Reformation day and remains the issue today. Are we saved by grace alone or by grace plus something we do? Verses 8-9 answer that.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)

"Not your own doing. Not your own doing." The story is told that there was a conference on world religions and they were debating what they had in common and what was unique. C.S. Lewis walked into the room and asked, "What's the rumpus about?" When he heard the question on the table about what is unique about Christianity he replied, "Oh that's easy. Grace."¹

"It is the gift of God." There are so many words he could have used that would allow for man to contribute something to his salvation. The provision of God. The opportunity of God. The open door of God. Almost anything but the word he did use—gift. For something to be a gift is must be received. If anything is earned it is no longer a gift. It is a wage or barter or quid pro quo. But "gift" eliminates anything being done by the receiver of the gift or it's no longer a gift. God's salvation and grace is a gift.

It is also *a muzzle*. *"So that no man can boast."* If there is anything that we do that contributes to our salvation, then we have a wee little something we can boast in—even the choice to believe. This is the problem with what is known as Semi-Pelagianism or decisional regeneration that claims that salvation is by grace alone but denies the depravity of man. It clings to a spark of goodness that responds to the gospel. But isn't that something I can point to and say, *I was smart enough, wise enough, good enough to believe?* Doesn't that bring a little bit of man's doings in the back door of salvation?

Grace alone says that salvation is totally of God from first to last.

***"If we end up in hell, it's our fault. If we end up in heaven, it's God's fault."*²**

In our home, the current favorite game is Hide and Seek. With a 4- and 2-year-old, the game works a little differently. I will hide, and they love to try and find me. I'll sometimes cough or make a noise if they are having trouble finding me. That tips them off. Why? Because I want them to find me. When they hide it's much different. First, they always hide in the same place. I'll encourage them to hide somewhere different, but they always hide under the ottoman. Second, almost from the moment I say, "Ready or not, here I come!" they start making noises indicating that they are, yet again, under the ottoman. My girls desperately want to be found.

Liberal theology says that we are like my daughters under the ottoman. While we may be apart from God, we desperately want to be found. We do things that somehow assist God in finding us and saving us. Yes, God saves, but somehow in some aspect we have something to do with it.

¹ Source Unknown.

² A paraphrase of something Kimber Kauffman said.

Biblical theology says, *there is none who seek after God, no not one*. We aren't hiding and hoping to be found. We are Adam and Eve hiding in the garden hoping not to be found out. Every day we put on clothing is, in part, hoping we will not be found.

God's searching for us is an act of his mercy. His finding us is completely his doing. His provision for our salvation through Christ is all him—nothing of us—so that no one in heaven will say, *look what I did*. The redeemed humanity will say, *look what he did*.

What Does Sola Grace Mean?

We are saved entirely by God

"And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."
(Romans 3:23–24)

Next week is justification by faith, the hallmark of the Reformation. Notice here we are justified by his grace. What is the difference? Faith is the means by which God declares us righteous. It also is a gift. "Justified by grace" means that God declares us righteous without anything in us contributing or inclining him to do so. God is the giver and we are the receivers.

What keeps grace from being sentimentality or God just being nice to us? How God did it. He didn't wink. He didn't overlook anything. He sent his Son Jesus to die for us. The cross is God taking sin on and overcoming it. But at an infinite price. *"Sin is violent lethal rebellion against God; and biblical grace is God's violent, raw, and bloody response."*³ Jesus' blood brings God's grace to us and pays the price God's holiness required so that God's grace could apply to us. There is nothing nice and sweet about grace, at least not God's grace.

We remain saved by God's grace

"Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:2)

I told you assurance of salvation was absent from the medieval church. *How can I know if I have done enough? Work hard enough?* The answer from the church was that if your life was good enough you would in the end be justified.

Luther was terrified of dying. How could he know that he had done enough? Worked hard enough? Been morally good enough?

But then Sola Grace stepped into his understanding. If I am saved by grace apart from anything I do to earn it or deserve it, then my assurance is not based on my performance but on God's grace to save. I enter salvation by his grace. I remain in salvation forever by his grace. It is God's grace from first to last. Herein is our assurance.

"What an astonishing thought it will be, to think of the immeasurable difference between our deservings and receivings--between the state we should have been in, and the state we are in. What depths of gratitude will we feel to look down upon hell

³ Carl Trueman as quoted in *Grace Alone*, p. 11).

and think, 'Yonder is the place that sin would have brought me; but this is where Christ has brought me!'"⁴

Only in heaven will we truly appreciate salvation by grace, if we can gaze into hell and realize that is what I deserved but eternal life is what I have, forever, and ever, and ever. Sola Grace.

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⁴ Richard Baxter, *Aim High*, p. 33f.)