

***The Gift of Grace: Sola Gratia***  
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***FPC Chapel & Sanctuary Services***  
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Romans 3:21-25

*Today we continue our “Sola” sermon series for the month of October, which explores a collection of sayings known as “Solas,” Latin for “only”. These were core teachings of Martin Luther from the Reformation, which we’re celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this month. These concepts are still critically important to our Protestant faith today. So far in this series we have covered Scripture alone and Faith alone. Today we will cover Sola Gratia, Grace alone.*

*Our passage this morning is from the third chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. You’ll notice these are some of the same verses Pastor Tom read for Faith Alone. That’s because these verses are rich with theological meaning and worth repeating. Martin Luther called this passage “the chief point, and the very central place...of the whole Bible.” Hear now the word of God.*

<sup>21</sup>But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is confirmed by the law and the prophets, <sup>22</sup>the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, <sup>23</sup>since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup>they are now justified freely by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup>whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed.

*This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.***

*Let us pray:*

Gracious and loving Lord, open our ears, eyes, hearts and minds this morning, that we might hear your word for our lives today. In your most holy name we pray,  
Amen.

## Sermon

My mother was a school teacher and often received sweet gifts from her students, but there were some strange gifts too that came across her desk too. She and her teacher friends would compare notes to see who had received the craziest gift that year. And you wouldn't believe some of the things they collected. But outside of random eccentric teacher gifts, most people love to receive gifts.

Gifts are wonderful because you don't have to do anything to earn them. They are given because someone simply wants to give you something to show they care for you. Gifts are free. You don't owe anyone anything for the gift. Think about birthday gifts in particular. You receive gifts on your birthday simply because you were born, you are alive, and you mean something to others. How amazing is that?

In a similar manner, just on a much grander scale that is hard to even comprehend, every *one* of us has been freely gifted with the grace of God. God has given us the king of all gifts by giving his only begotten Son, who died and rose for us and offers us new life every day.

The idea that we do not have to work for our salvation, that rather it is a gift from God, is what helped fuel the fire of the Reformation 500 years ago. You know the story. Martin Luther and others were frustrated by the sale of indulgences by the Roman Catholic church, which emphasized that salvation had to be earned. Indulgences were a way to purchase credit towards your salvation.

In opposition, Luther insisted that faith in Jesus, and not good works, was the only way to obtain God's pardon for sin. That salvation was a gift of grace to be received

rather than something you had to work for or pay indulgences to obtain. This idea is still counter cultural today, because for most things in life we have to work really hard or pay a lot of money in order to receive something valuable. In our consumeristic culture, we expect everything to be a commodity with a price tag. And yet, salvation is not based upon what we do, but rather the gift of what Christ has already done for us on our behalf.

Another pastor tells the story of how one of his seminary professors, unbeknownst to the students, tried to drive this point home during an exam. As students read through the exam you could feel the dread and trepidation in the room. The questions were way too hard, and way beyond what they could answer in the given amount of time. But for those who read it all the way through, the very last sentence on the exam read, “You can answer the questions as listed above for your grade, or you can sign your name on this line and receive an A.” The ones who read this sentence looked around incredulously. They couldn’t believe it. All they had to do was sign their name? They didn’t have to do one ounce of work to receive an A? As they quietly turned their exams in, it dawned on them one-by-one that their professor had used this exam to demonstrate how God’s gift of grace is truly a gift that doesn’t have to be earned.<sup>1</sup>

This once again drives home the point that God’s grace is a gift freely given to us. And the only thing we have to do is to accept that gift. Of course, this does not mean this gift is a free pass to never do good works for the Lord. Rather, it’s motivation to take this inward spirit of grace and live it out in faithful ways. Luther explained that it

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Stanley.

is not the good we do, rather it is the good we trust Him to do in and through us. That faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace.<sup>2</sup>

But there are times in life that feel shaky, and it is only by the grace of God shown to us through others that helps us make it through. I particularly think about the grace showed to me by some dear friends years ago in Atlanta. I was 26-years old and working for a large consulting firm. I'd lived in Paris, France the previous year for work, had returned and bought a condo on the Chattahoochee River with my own hard-earned money, and had recently won a nice award at work. To the outside world, it probably looked like I had it pretty together for my age. But that was far from the truth. Inwardly, I was battling both an eating disorder and depression. And after three long and soulfully torturous years of dealing with these issues on my own, I finally confided in two very good friends. They couldn't have been more gracious.

When we moved recently, I ran across a journaling notebook they had made for me. Every day had a hand-written page with a Bible verse, inspirational sayings, and several other things to help guide me as I inched my way towards healing. This was just a simple 1-inch binder notebook with printer paper that probably cost less than \$5 overall, but the time and care and love and attention dedicated to it to help me was priceless. And the fact that I still have it over 15 years later is a testament that I will never forget the grace offered to me by these friends during one of the hardest times in my life.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Tomkins. "#304: Luther on Romans". <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/luther-romans/>

I imagine every one of us knows how wonderful it feels to receive the gift of grace. Grace comes in big and small ways. And it's even more meaningful when we feel we *don't* deserve it or it's unexpected. Here are a few examples.

Like when you know you've treated someone in a way that's not as well as you should have, but they offer you kindness anyway.

Or when your child has broken something of your neighbors, and they say that it's okay.

When you've been waiting forever to make a left turn out of a parking lot onto a busy street, and someone finally stops and lets you through.

When your kids are going crazy in the check-out line, and the person in front of you lets you go first.

When someone could justifiably yell at you for your mistake, but they choose to laugh with you instead.

When you have to get up extra early, and your spouse has a hot cup of coffee waiting for you.

When a local business stays open a few minutes beyond closing so you can finish shopping.

When another car in a parking lot lets you have the closer spot.

When friends offer to take your toddler on playdates so you can have time bonding with your newborn.

When you drop change all over the grocery store floor, and five people get on their hands and knees and scramble to help you pick it up.

When your kids give you a smile and a hug just when you need it.

When friends offer their private plane to fly your child wherever she needs to go for her medical treatment.

When you've had a rough day and you're not feeling very good about yourself, and your spouse wraps you in his arms and says, "It's going to be okay, sweetheart."

When you've lost a loved one, and friends bring casseroles and cry with you.

When your grandchild, whom you've nick-named "the tornado", stops long enough to climb up on your lap, stroke your face, and say, "I love you."

When friends sit with you for hours during chemo treatments.

When your friend texts you a funny joke at work because he knows you need a laugh.

When you reconcile with a family member and work past the hurt feelings.

When a birth mother gently hands you her one-day old baby in the hospital and says, "Here's your baby. I know you'll love her well."

All of these experiences are just a *tiny* handful of ways we experience grace in life in large and small ways. But we're often so busy in life that we let them breeze right by without noticing. And yet, if we take time to pay attention to these moments of grace, then they will carry us through the moments of difficulty.

And thinking through these meaningful moments of grace helps each of us realize how important it also is to pass along grace to others as we strive to live out our faith. For grace is not a gift to hoard, but rather a gift to share, to pay forward. Earlier I said there is nothing we have to do in order to receive a gift, and that's true. But for those of us raised by a good Southern mama, we were taught there was something you did have to do *after* receiving a gift, which, of course, is a hand-written thank you note. Essentially, our paying grace forward to others after receiving the gift of grace ourselves, is the equivalent of a southern thank you note. And you know our mamas would want us to do that!

The hymn “Amazing Grace” captures the essence of the gift of grace. Next week at Kirkin’ of the Tartans we will have the opportunity to sing this beloved hymn as the bagpipes play. I always get a little teary looking out over the congregation on Kirkin’ Sunday. There is that intangible feeling as all the Tartans are brought in and *Amazing Grace* is sung that “this is the essence of who we are.” We celebrate our history and Scottish roots in the church, but we also celebrate all who have come before us. Our ancestors who have paved the way for us to live out our faith today. And we are also reminded that long after we are gone, the tartans will remain, and one day, God willing, our great-grandchildren will carry them, and it will be God’s grace that carries them through life, just like it does ours now.

And in this spirit, the lyrics ring so true – “Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; ’Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, And grace will lead me home. The Lord has promised good to me, His Word my hope secures; He will my Shield and Portion be, As long as life endures. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

We have all been gifted by the grace of God. And grace is the gift that can keep on giving. John tells us that it is in God’s love and mercy and in Christ’s fullness that we have all received grace upon grace (1:16). It is a gift freely given to us by God, but it’s up to us to pass it on. So let’s all make our mamas proud this week, writing those figurative thank you notes by showing some grace to others.

*All praise, honor and glory be to God the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.*