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This way forward

500 YEARS OF REFORMATION: SOLA GRATIA

Romans 3:23-24

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Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

You're going to get a mansion; you're going to get a mansion. Everybody here is going to get a mansion! In fact, if you tell others to come, they will too!

That is grace. That heavenly mansion God offers us all.

This week's Latin catch phrase, *Sola Gratia*, arose out of the Reformers concern that during their age the church was placing too much emphasis on the believer's participation in the process of their salvation. That somehow, in order for God's salvific grace to be effective, the believer had to respond with good works, to cooperate. Salvation depended upon God *and us*.

But for Calvin, such a notion was anathema!

Through his examination of scripture, he saw a pattern. Salvation depended entirely upon God. This was the point of the Salvation history in the Old Testament. Time and again, God chose those with deeply imperfect faiths to be key cogs in the divine plan to reconcile humanity. Those choices underscored that salvation comes not because of our heroic faith and intrinsic worth, but solely out of God's deep love and his tireless effort to draw us to Him.

It is true that it is through faith alone, that is trust, that we receive this gift of salvation, but it is solely because of God's grace that this gift is even offered to us at all. If faith/trust is the how of salvation then grace is the why. Just because God loves us.

As Paul declares in Romans, we are justified by grace as a gift.

To unpack this rather dense theology I propose, first of all, that you think of this grace as a literal gift. As it has been said, mercy is not getting what you deserve (i.e. punished), but grace *is getting* what you do not deserve (i.e. salvation). Imagine this gift is that pearl of great price Jesus refers to, with a bright red bow wrapped around it.

We are given this gift
despite our unworthiness,
beyond what we could possibly be worth,
never taken away when we prove
unworthy,
and we fully enjoy its worth when we
receive it in faith...

Despite our unworthiness.

Despite our unworthiness, everyone who has ever lived has this supremely radiant pearl with their name on it. Even though everyone of us has unequivocally shown that we won't take proper care of it, that we will take it for granted, and furthermore will use it more for our own benefit than that of others, God still gives it to us. This unworthiness is our sin.

Paul tells us in Romans, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." The favorite hymn of so many people sums up the perfect response to this grace,

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me!*

It is a sweet sound indeed! Of course, we know that this hymn's author was a slave trader who saw the light of God's love and had a change of heart. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. No. Grace is not about an especially unique sinner, but every single one of us! From a human perspective, we feel as if there is some dramatic distinction between sinners.

But from God's perspective,
All Fall Short...
All of us.

But not only is this gift given despite our unworthiness, it is given beyond what we could possibly be worth. This is the next layer of God's grace.

Even if we had lived a perfect life, this glorious pearl is worth far more than we could have ever earned, even with a perfect track record!

It would be like giving me a Stradivarius violin, instead of someone who had devoted their life to this art, practicing painstakingly for decades while, at the same time, studying the history behind the instrument and its maker. All those years of blood and sweat makes that person the logical choice. I simply don't have the intrinsic talent to ever be able to fully appreciate such a gift.

Salvation is not given to us because God sees potential in us – as if we were gold, tarnished by sin, that just needs some buffing out to restore our intrinsic worth.

Even if we were perfect, there is nothing that would compel God to offer us an eternal blessing of being part of the family of heaven. Think about the flowers of the field. They neither toil nor spin, nor sin; yet they are only here for a time and then gone. But, through God's free gracious love, it is given to us all, not simply those with the most inherent potential.

In fact, in order to demonstrate the primacy of grace, God takes special care in the history of salvation, not to simply recruit those with the most potential the way we might assemble, perhaps a football team or a dance troupe.

Catholic scholar Bishop Barron wrote,
Absolutely essential to the biblical witness and to the best of the Christian spiritual tradition is the assertion that the divine love comes first ...The Lord didn't ask Simon's permission or assess whether he was the most effective

fisherman; he just got into the man's boat and commenced to give orders. And Jesus sums up this principle of the primacy of grace with admirable directness: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16)

But God's grace goes to even greater lengths. Not only does it come despite our unworthiness and beyond what we could possibly be worth, it is never taken away no matter how unworthy we prove to be.

This doctrine is known as the perseverance of the saints, or "once saved always saved." Even though God gives us this beautiful, gorgeous pearl when we did not deserve it and then we trashed it at a late-night bender, God does not take it back.

God, the gracious giver, is also the steadfast lover, no matter how poorly we treat this grace.

One place to see this scriptural warrant is in the eleventh chapter of Romans, "The gifts and call of God are irrevocable."

Again and again, we see throughout the Old Testament, God remains faithful to Israel even when they stray. They are the chosen people; chosen utterly by God's grace and time and again they spurn that gift through worshipping idols abusing the poor and violating God's laws.

Jesus comes back to his disciples – even after they fled in fear to protect themselves by abandoning him at the cross.

This is unconditional grace. Salvation begins and ends with God. Period.

It would have been enough if God had given grace despite our unworthiness,
it would have been enough had God given it beyond what we could possibly be worth.
It would have been enough had God never taken it away when we prove unworthy,
but God gives it to us when we don't even think this gift is worth being had.

God is not simply casting a net hoping to catch some people for the heavenly places, rather as Paul tells us, “they are justified!” All have sinned and *they* are now justified by his grace as a gift.

All have this eternal love of God.

For those who have followed Calvin’s thinking, this is known as irresistible grace. God, who is Lord of the universe cannot ultimately be thwarted by mere human striving.

In Acts 13:48 “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; **and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers.**”

It turns out that even our faith we have in Jesus is a gracious, free gift from the Lord. Everything to do with our salvation belongs to God. That is grace, it comes freely, irresistibly, and will never be withdrawn. Thanks be to God!