

Saved by Grace Alone

- I. What Grace Is
- II. What Grace Isn't
- III. Why it Matters

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(Ephesians 2:4-9) 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. {6} And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, {7} in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. {8} For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- {9} not by works, so that no one can boast.

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It's a question that you've maybe been asked before. A question that you've maybe asked of others. On the other hand, it may be a question that you've never really thought about. A question that leaves you feeling a little uneasy. The question is simply this, "If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure where you would go?" And, if you're thinking you're going to heaven, then I need to ask you a follow-up question, namely, "Why do you think you're going to heaven?" Or to put it another way, "If God asks you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what are you going to tell him?"

My friends, you realize that how you answer those 2 questions will determine where you spend eternity. Not only that, how you answer those questions will determine whether your heart in life is at peace with God, or whether it is restless and filled with fear. In fact, if you think about it, aren't these the kinds of questions that once tormented Martin Luther? For the first 30 years of his life, Luther found himself wondering, "Where do I stand with God? What's going to happen to me when I die?"

By God's grace, Luther ultimately found the answer to those questions, in the pages of the Scriptures. And today, on this Festival of the Reformation, we are gathered to celebrate the truths that God revealed to him. Today we begin a sermon series on the four fundamental truths on which the Lutheran church, yes, on which the Christian Church is built. You see them in our logo today. They are Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone, and Christ Alone. Today, we take up the first key truth, namely,

We are Saved by Grace Alone

To help us fully appreciate that key truth, maybe we need to define exactly,

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First, what Grace is. If I were to ask you to give me a definition of the word Grace, what would you say? Grace is what? Yes, God's undeserved love. That's an excellent definition of grace. It underscores that grace is first and foremost an emotion that originates in God. Grace is not something we have. Rather it's something God shows, something that God displays. It's sometimes referred to as "God's favorable disposition toward fallen man." God, in effect, turns a smiling face toward a world of ugly, wretched sinners.

And really, that leads us to the second component in the term grace, namely, that grace is God's undeserved love. There is nothing that sinful man can do to earn God's love. Rather, quite the contrary. Scripture says that because of our sin, we were objects of God's wrath. Isn't that what St. Paul writes here in our text for today? *Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.* In other words, all we've earned from a holy God is his anger.

And yet, in spite of that fact, in spite of the fact that we deserve God's just and eternal punishment, what has God done—and why has he done it? St. Paul tells us right here in our text. He writes, *Because of his great love for us* (the Greek word there is *agape*. God's unconditional love, love which doesn't take into consideration the object of his love. It's God's love for the unlovable. The passage goes on...) *God, who is rich in mercy* (God is compassionate, he takes pity on poor, helpless wretched sinners like us) *made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.* (Ephesians 2:5).

In that passage, I want you to notice who it was that took action to see to it that we were saved. It wasn't you or me. We were dead. So God made us alive with Christ. That my friends, is grace. In fact, maybe we should start making a list of all the characteristics of God's grace. We already said that: 1. God's grace is undeserved. And, 2. Grace is active. Grace is more than a warm fuzzy feeling in God. Grace is what prompted God to actually send his son to live and die in our place—which leads to another characteristic of grace.

3. Grace is always connected to Christ. Remember what Saint Paul said here in our text? *Even when we were dead in our sins, God made us alive with Christ.* That's an important connection to make. God shows us his grace in Christ. If a person says, "I think I'll get to heaven by God's grace", but then they refuse to believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, they're really missing what God's grace is. As a just and holy God, God can't simply overlook sin. He must punish it. And he did that by having Jesus pay the price for every single sinner in the world—which leads to another characteristic of Grace.

4. God's grace is universal. What does Scripture say? *For God so loved the world...* Are you an inhabitant of the world? Then you know that God's grace applies to you. God has shown you his grace by giving his only begotten son, so that what? *So that those who believe in him shall not perish.*

Characteristic number 5. God's grace is received through faith. Isn't that right? God loved the whole world. He sent Jesus to die for all sinners. But the only ones who get the benefit of that grace are those who believe that it's theirs through Christ. God's grace is received through faith. (We'll hear more about that next week.) For now, let's look at 2 more characteristics of grace: #6. God's grace is efficacious. Remember what that means? We talked about it a few weeks ago. It means that it is God's undeserved love for sinners like us that ultimately has the power to melt our hearts of stone, and lead us to say, "Lord, I believe. I believe that, in Christ, you have had mercy on me."

And yet, it must also be said that: #7. God's grace is also resistible. In other words, God will not force anyone to believe that he is gracious. Sometimes, human beings in their natural hardness of heart, stubbornly refuse to believe that God has given them the salvation as a free gift in Christ.

So, you might say, that's what Grace is. It's the free and unconditional love that God has shown to undeserving sinners like us. Love that led God to do everything necessary to save us from our sins.

But now, maybe you're thinking to yourself, "Yes, I know I'm saved by grace. And I'm thankful for it. But, in the end, doesn't everyone believe that if they're going to heaven, it will

only be “by the grace of God?” I mean, didn't I read recently that even the Catholics and the Lutherans have come to agree that people are saved by grace, through faith?” Well, that all depends on how you define “grace.” In fact, maybe we'd better take a moment and define, not only I. what grace is, but also:

II. What Grace Isn't

In the Post-Crescent this week there was an article about the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Maybe you read it. In that article, the author made this statement: “*After 500 years of acrimony, it's good to know that Catholic and Lutheran leaders have resolved the most troubling issue that led to the split—eternal salvation cannot be bought or earned. It is freely given by God's Amazing Grace, through faith alone.*” You might read those words and think, “Wow! That's cool! The Catholics and Lutherans finally believe we're saved by grace!” Well, yes and no. Yes, in 1999, in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, some Lutherans and Catholics agreed to the statement that we are saved by grace alone. What they didn't agree on was exactly what grace is. Or more specifically, they agreed to disagree on what grace is.

On the one hand, confessional Lutherans have always defined grace as the unmerited favor of God. Grace is not something in us. It's something in God. Something that moves him to declare a world full of sinners to be not guilty, for the sake of Jesus' life and death in their place.

The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, defines grace in a much different way. According to Roman theology, grace is something that God gives to us. They call it “Infused Grace” (*Gratia Infusa*). In other words, it's something that God pours into us. It's what God gives us to help us to do the things necessary to be saved. In the Catholic Church, grace is the helping hand that God offers us to help people work out their own salvation.

My friends, do you see the difference between those two definitions of grace? One is something totally in God. The other is something in us. One is something that moves God to declare sinners not guilty. The other is something that helps sinners work hard to become less guilty. One is shown to us, apart from anything we do. One is doled out in as people do the things required by the church. One is salvation totally by God. One is salvation by a combination of God and man. And really, that's still the difference between the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church to this day. Is my salvation 100% in God's hands, or do I have a role in obtaining it?

Now again, maybe you are thinking to yourself, “Does it really matter? Does it really matter whether we're saved by something in God or something in us?” Yes it does. In fact, let's consider

III. Why It Matters

Did you know that every human being in the world has this thought basically hard-wired into their brain? It's the idea “My standing with God is dependent upon how well I live my life. In other words, if I do what my conscience tells me is right, then I can expect that God will be happy and bless me, and take me to a better place when I die. So therefore, I'm going to do the best I can, and then hope for the best from God.”

But here's the problem with that kind of thinking. What if our best isn't good enough for God? What if God's expectations are not “Give it your best shot”? What if God's expectations are, as Jesus put it, “*Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” (*Matthew 5:48*)? What if, as Scripture says, *there is no one righteous, not even one* (*Romans 3:10*)? Then what are all our efforts good for? They might look good and help out our neighbor, but they won't get us right with God—at least not according to what God tells us in his Word. And that means that if we're

counting on what we do to get us right with God, we're sunk!

But what if God decided that he didn't need you to give him a reason to love you? What if God decided that your standing with him wouldn't depend on anything you did or didn't do. What if, purely out of the goodness of his heart, God decided to let someone else live a perfect life in your place? What if, for no good reason on your part, God simply gave you credit for what Jesus did? What would that mean? It would mean that you are saved—by God's grace alone. And, if you go back to the question we started with, it would also mean that if you died tonight, you would know for sure where you are going. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus, you're going to heaven! To God be the glory! Amen.