

SAVED BY GRACE
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 10, 2017
based on Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:1-9

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand—Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” The series relates to the fact that this fall is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. We are using central themes of the Reformation to help us to think afresh about our own core beliefs, and how we can stand firm in faith in the midst of today’s uncertainties and pressures.

Last week we noted that the main ideas of the Reformation can all be summed up in little Latin phrases. The phrase last Sunday was *sola scriptura*—the Bible alone. This refers to Martin Luther’s assertion that the ultimate source of truth about God is the Bible; we need to look to God’s self-revelation in the Scripture, rather than to human ideas, to understand who God is and how God relates to us.

The Latin word *sola* means only or alone, and there are actually five key concepts of the Reformation that begin with this word. They are called the five solas. Last week was *sola scriptura*; and this morning we are considering another of the five solas—*sola gratia*, the idea that we are saved by grace alone. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

Grace in the Bible is, of course, not a woman’s name or the prayer that we say before a meal. Grace describes how God acts. It is a key element in the Old Testament, and it comes to its ultimate expression in Jesus. The concept of grace is perhaps the most distinctive element in the teaching of Jesus. The concept is not found in the same way in any other religion; it is an idea so radical that many Christians have a hard time really taking hold of it.

A prime illustration of grace is Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, where the younger of two sons takes his share of his father’s inheritance, goes off to a far country, and squanders all the money in dissolute living. Now broke, the son resolves to return to his father’s household, in order to at least have enough to eat; but he knows that after all that he has done, he does not deserve anything from his father. He plans to say to his father, “Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please accept me as one of your hired servants.” But as he is approaching home, his father sees him, runs out to meet him, embraces him, and calls for his servants to prepare a big party to welcome the son back home. The son does not deserve anything; but he is given acceptance, loving welcome, and abundance. This is grace—the gift of what we do not deserve.

Another parable that illustrates grace is Jesus’ parable of the workers in the vineyard, where a landowner hires day laborers at the start of a day and promises to pay them each a denarius, which was the standard day’s wage. Fair enough. After a few hours, the landowner hires additional laborers, promising simply to pay “what is right,” then a few hours later, he hires still more; and so it goes, with additional laborers being hired throughout the day, until the ones hired at the very last work only one hour. Finally, it is time for them all to be paid. The ones hired

first receive what they were promised—a denarius. The ones hired last also receive a denarius—a full day’s pay, even though they only worked one hour. They receive what they do not deserve.

What does the average person think when hearing this kind of story? They think, “That’s not fair!” In the parable, this in fact is the response of the workers who had toiled in the vineyard since dawn—they grumble against the landowner, because they think, “How is it fair that we get the same pay as these people who only worked one hour?” But the landowner replies, “You got what you were promised—a rightful day’s wage. So if I choose to pay these others more than what they deserve, do you begrudge my generosity?” The landowner has chosen to act with grace, giving some people considerably more than what they actually deserve.

But people often don’t like this idea of grace, and that is apparent not only in the parable of the workers in the vineyard but also in the parable of the prodigal son. In that parable, when the father announces a big party for the returning son, the elder son, who had stayed home all this time and taken care of the farm, complains, and says, “Hey, I stayed home and lived responsibly; so how is it that this kid who blew the inheritance is now the one who gets a big party?” We may readily identify with this responsible son, as well as with those early workers in the vineyard, because we tend to think that each person ought to get what he or she deserves.

The idea that you should get what you deserve is in fact a central concept in most world religions. It is the basic idea in the Hindu concept of karma, which says that you will ultimately get a cosmic payback for everything that you do, whether for good or for ill. Judaism likewise has the idea that the wicked will get punishment, and the good will get reward. When Mohammed began the religion of Islam, he carried forward many elements of Christianity—belief in one God of goodness, the value of regular prayer, the importance of giving to help others, the promise of life in heaven beyond death, and the list goes on. But he could not get his mind around the idea of grace—that idea that people might somehow get what they have not deserved. He taught rather that the wicked will be punished and only the righteous—those who have been obedient to God’s laws and who therefore deserve a reward—will enter into heaven.

The same pattern of thinking can be found in many people in the Christian church. In fact, right here is a central issue of the Reformation—Catholic teaching in the Middle Ages had moved away from Jesus’ teaching of grace, and conveyed instead the message that you will finally get, in eternity, the reward or punishment that you deserve. The medieval church did teach that salvation begins with grace, as God reaches to us with a love that is beyond what we deserve, but the church also taught that salvation must be completed by our obedient response to God—we must finally achieve a righteousness such that we merit the reward of heaven. Of course, there was more complexity in full medieval Catholic teaching, but the bottom line message that people in the church got was that you have to somehow make yourself worthy of heaven.

Martin Luther, who would become the central figure in the Protestant Reformation, grew up in this teaching, and as a young man he entered the Augustinian order—he became a monk, and a very devout monk. If anybody was on track to be worthy of heaven, it was Luther.

But although he diligently sought to live a holy life, when Luther looked at himself clearly, he realized that he was deeply flawed. He failed at times to do the right thing, he stumbled at times into doing the wrong thing, his heart was not always right, he was not totally devoted to God—he realized that if he got what he deserved, he was in trouble. If he had to be worthy of heaven, he was not going to make it. That is a realization that we will all have when, like Luther, we look at ourselves honestly.

In response to his sinfulness, Luther tried the route that the medieval Catholic church laid out for sinners—go to Confession, do penance, try to do better. But he recognized that he always fell short. The decisive turning point came when he searched the Scriptures, especially the book of Romans, and he saw the verse that we heard this morning—“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are set right with God by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:23-24) That Word of God spoke powerfully to Luther’s heart. We all fall short. None of us can make ourselves worthy. But we are set right with God nevertheless by God’s grace, which comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Luther had rediscovered the heart of the gospel. Our eternal salvation is not something that we earn, not something that we can ever deserve. It is a gift of God. It does not depend upon us, because if our eternal destiny in heaven were to depend on something that we have to do, it would always be questionable. But in fact our salvation depends on God’s grace. As Paul said in Ephesians, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8)

Thus we arrive at the second great “sola” of the Reformation—sola gratia. Luther and other Reformers realized that we cannot be saved by God’s grace plus some measure of righteousness on our part, or else our salvation would be uncertain, because we are never righteous enough. We must be saved “sola gratia”—by grace alone, if we are truly to have hope. The good news is that God has acted through Jesus Christ to freely give us what we do not deserve—as He gives us forgiveness, reconciliation with God, and life everlasting in God’s eternal blessing. All this is a free gift through Christ; and as Luther received that gift, he felt himself drawn into God’s mercy and promise.

But if salvation is free, this creates the possibility for another kind of distortion entering into the picture. Generally speaking, in our day, if something is free, that means it’s cheap. It’s not worth all that much and can be taken for granted. So today, many people have gotten the notion that salvation through Jesus is basically a given and therefore it does not call for anything from us. You just believe in Jesus and get your free ticket to heaven. It’s easy; it’s cheap.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (a good Lutheran) had a name for this kind of thinking. He called it cheap grace. Cheap grace is the idea that because God’s salvation is freely given, it can be casually regarded and really calls for nothing in particular on our part. Cheap grace is popular. There are many people today who would identify themselves as Christian and who would then define Christianity as essentially “going to heaven because you believe in Jesus.” There’s really nothing more, they think, that is demanded of us, because salvation is free—it’s easy and cheap.

But such thinking is not what the Bible is talking about when it talks about God saving us by grace. The actual Biblical idea, Bonhoeffer said, is better characterized by the phrase, “costly grace.” Grace is costly, first of all, because it costs Jesus his life. The reason we have forgiveness and the promise of heaven in spite of our sinfulness is because Jesus goes to the cross to atone for our sin. When we realize the greatness of what Jesus has done for us, then we can no longer take grace lightly, but we are moved to respond with a real commitment of our lives to Christ, which brings us to the second way in which grace is costly. Grace costs us our lives, in the sense that it moves us to devote our whole life to God. As Jesus said, “Those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find life.”

Bonhoeffer himself became a prime example of costly grace. He lived in Germany in the first part of the twentieth century, and his commitment to Christ led him to oppose the Nazis. He was arrested, imprisoned, and hanged shortly before the Nazi defeat in 1945. His book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he outlined the ideas of costly versus cheap grace, became a classic ever since.

During the Reformation, as great debates swirled around the ideas of the Reformers, many Catholic theologians argued strongly against the idea of *sola gratia* precisely because they felt that if you tell people that they are saved by free grace, they are likely to take salvation for granted, and they are going to think that there’s nothing more to Christian living than just saying, “Thank you, Jesus, see you in heaven.” People, they feared, would become spiritual slackers and would not bother to actually do anything for God in this life. Of course, those Catholic theologians were right insofar as they anticipated the whole attitude of cheap grace.

But Luther and other Reformers realized that when we truly take hold of God’s grace, we will not fall into spiritual complacency, but our lives become transformed. No longer is religion an endless struggle to try to make ourselves worthy, or an endless exercise in condemning other people because they are unworthy. Instead, as we are touched by God’s grace, we know ourselves to be accepted and loved by God, we see that we are heirs of God’s eternal promises, and we are moved, then, to respond in thankfulness and in wholehearted commitment to God. We are moved finally to live in grace, extending forgiveness to others, and giving ourselves freely for God’s Kingdom. In the light of God’s grace, we no longer think in terms of who deserves what, for we realize that we are receiving from God far more than we could possibly deserve. Thus in the end, grace sets free for a life abundant in love and in the assurance of God’s promises.

Paul put it well in Ephesians: “Even when we were dead through our sins, God made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in heavenly places, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:5-7)