

“Grace Alone”

For Martin Luther, grace was the repeated line, or the refrain, of his theology. It was kind of like that favorite part of a hymn or song that you sing over and over again. And even though you’ve sung the words hundreds of times, you never get tired of them because the message always rings true. For me those words would be first verse of Amazing Grace. “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.” I can’t hear them or sing them enough, because they mean so much. The amazing grace of God has saved a poor unfortunate creature like me. Martin Luther died almost 300 years before this hymn was written, but grace was still the refrain of his theology and he repeated it often. “Grace consists in this, he would say, “that God is merciful to us, shows himself gracious for the sake of the Lord Christ, forgives all sins, and will not impute them unto us for eternal death. This is grace; the covering up of all sins for the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Sounds a lot like what Paul says in our epistle reading from Romans chapter 5 doesn't it? “The free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace and the free gift by the grace of that one man, Jesus Christ.” This gift is by the personal merit and grace of Christ alone. He was pleasing to God so he might give this gift to us. But this gift isn't like some birthday present or Christmas present that we might give...those gifts are for people we generally like, or at least know in some way. God’s gift of grace is given to all people, even to his enemies, out of his mercy. No one is worthy of it —I’m not; you’re not—no one is. But all were made worthy and accounted worthy by the mercy and grace of God.

This is the primary message of the Church! And it’s such good news. Jesus takes away sin. His death and resurrection pay the price we could never pay. We were lost, but through the gift of God’s grace, we are found. “As sin reigned in death,

grace reigns through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord,” Paul writes. This is our message...the grace of God reigns!

It almost sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? I mean, God does it all. He chooses to love us; he chooses to save us. Through his grace everything we do to try and save ourselves, no matter how honorable and good, is eliminated—they don't matter. He doesn't need them because the whole cause of our salvation has been transferred to Christ. Apart from anything we do, we are pleasing to God on account of the Lord Jesus. I mean honestly, I could stop right now...this is all we need to hear. But I'm not.

Because even though God's grace is sufficient, there still seems to be all these forces driving us towards not really buying this. Sure, Jesus did everything to save us we think, but still there is this underlying distrust that makes us think that we better prove we believe it just in case. It's easier to just believe that God does his part and we do our part, like some kind of team effort. And this actually makes more sense to hard workers you like and me, because it's the way real life works. We contribute. We work, we get paid. We study, we do better on a test. We exercise, we get fit. We don't just sit back and receive any of this as a free gift. Nothing works that way! So it's not that surprising we doubt that God's grace through Jesus really is enough. It just natural for us to want to do a little something to help this saving relationship with God along. But this is a misunderstanding of his gift of grace. And when we misunderstand it, we might just misunderstand a lot more about our Christian faith than we think.

I am reminded of a scene in one of my favorite holiday movies, “Christmas Vacation.” The Griswold family is sitting down for the big Christmas Eve dinner and right before Clark starts to carve the turkey he turns to old Aunt Bethany. He says, “Since this is Aunt Bethany's 80th Christmas, I think she should lead us in the saying of grace.” “What dear,” Aunt Bethany responds? “Grace,” someone yells out. “Grace,” says Aunt Bethany, “she passed away 30 years ago.” Yes, I just used a scene from a silly movie to make a point about something sacred, but hear me out.

Sometimes, people, including many of us talk about grace and think about grace from a totally different perspective than what God reveals to us in his word. God says, “Grace is a free gift” (Romans 5:15). God says, “Grace reigns through Christ to life eternal” (Romans 5:25). We hear it but we want to fight it. Why do we do this? Because it’s hard. I mean all of us, no matter how secure and mature we are in our faith, at some point have a hard time believing God isn't going to condemn us for our thoughts, words, and deeds. I mean it only make sense to think that God’s grace through Christ Jesus is not enough until we get this part or that part of our lives cleaned up. Sadly, some denominations of Christianity actually teach this kind of thing. God’s grace saves you, but you better do enough to keep it. The truth is the mystery of God’s gift of grace will never make sense to sinners. We want it to be conditional, as if he needs us to make this grace thing work, but he absolutely doesn’t! And yet, we just keep on trying to make sense of it. And when we do, we usually end up mixing up what God gives us and ultimately does for us in Christ, with the things he demands we do, not for him, but for other people. Doing more and trying harder is always the *result* of our being right with God, not the cause.

That’s why we need to be here my friends. We need our faith strengthened with the promise of God’s grace through Christ given through his words and sacraments. Not just every now and then, but over and over, because we need to die to this notion that anything we do saves us or secures God’s grace. His grace means that we do nothing but receive. Think of a baby bird who just sits in the nest with its mouth wide open when they’re hungry. They don't do anything but receive the gifts and live! That’s why we’re here—to receive God’s gift of grace, which is the assurance that our sins are covered up, and live! And through this gift, which is the fullness of Christ—his perfect life, death, and resurrection—that just what we get to life everlasting.

Amazing grace how sweet the sound! We once were lost, but now are found.
Thanks be to God. **Amen.**