



“The Thing About Grace”

Text: Ephesians 2:1-10

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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According to legend, five centuries ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther went to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral and nailed 95 arguments against the way the church was practicing faith. Equally, according to legend, that began the Protestant Reformation. In all honesty, what would become the Protestant Reformation began years earlier, with people like John Wycliffe and Jan Hus began questioning how the church presented the gospel and how people were to live as Christian people.

In even clearer terms, the Reformation began – and could not have begun – without the period we know as the Renaissance. Renaissance, in French, means “rebirth.” It was a time when the world was emerging from the Dark Ages, asking questions, thinking deeply, and challenging long held ideas. Everywhere – in art, architecture, politics, science and literature – new ways were being pioneered. Exploration – in every aspect of that word’s definition – was the order of the day.

So, little wonder with people asking questions and exploring ideas and traditions and experimenting with everything imaginable, that intense spirit of questioning and exploration came to the church. People like Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Knox, along with many others, but lesser known thinkers, began questioning everything. And as they did, the church began to twitch and shake and, finally, broke into two streams from which we have not yet fully recovered: the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church.

As the Reformation grew and developed, five statements – known as the *five solae* – grew out of that experience. It’s a little funny, I suppose, that a semi-literal interpretation of the phrase would be the “five onlys” – which seems a contradiction. But the *five solae* – encapsulated the nature of the Reformation’s focus. They are:

sola scriptura – only Scripture
(as opposed to a reliance on tradition)
sola Fide – only faith
(as opposed to earning one’s salvation)
solus Christus – only by Christ
(as opposed to others claiming one’s loyalties)
soli Deo Gloria – only for the glory of God
(as opposed to the glory of other humans)
and, sola gratia – only by grace
(as opposed to any action or effort we could make)

Now, we could be here the rest of the afternoon, or I could think about this as a five-part sermon series – but there is entirely too much to cover on that list. So, let’s pick one – perhaps the most misunderstood one. Let’s talk about grace.

Along the way, most of us were taught that grace is “the unmerited, undeserved favor and love of God,” or words to that effect. We were taught that there was nothing we could do to earn God’s love. We were taught that there was nothing we could do to demand God’s love. We were taught that we could not be good enough to deserve God’s love.

The late Professor Shirley Guthrie, put it this way:

God does not say, “I will love you *if you are good, if you prove yourself worthy, if you do so and so, if you first love me.*” God does not even say, “I will love you *if you first have faith in me or if you first humiliate yourself and grovel on the ground before me.*” God simply says, “I love you just as you are – *you*, not your righteousness, your humility, your faith, or your accomplishments of one kind or another.”¹

Grace says that God loves us in spite of ourselves – in spite of all the things that, by all rights, should separate us from God. Grace says that what we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us. Grace proclaims that what was once helplessly and irretrievably broken has been restored and made whole.

This understanding of grace is behind the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, when we read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph. 2:8) Don’t like the word “saved?” Try this out: “For by grace you have been made whole, you have been healed, you have been restored to your former condition, you have been re-established to the position you once held...”

And when we hear it that way, we can begin to understand why this idea that it is solely by the grace of God that we are redeemed and reunited with God and with each other is so very foundational to our faith. We are reminded that – as throughout all of Scripture – God makes the first move. God offers us the covenant. God sets us free. God breaks down the walls that separate and divide. God does what we ourselves cannot do.

This is grace.

And yet, we – in the church – have mishandled grace. That was the contention of the great German theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer taught us the lesson of “cheap grace,” which he defined as:

...bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament: grace as the church’s inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs...It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God’s love as merely a Christian idea of God...Cheap grace is, thus, denial of God’s living word, denial of the incarnation of the word of God.²

Bonhoeffer saw that the human tendency is to take whatever is offered us that is free and then assign it little or no value. He saw clearly that we all too easily take advantage of God’s love and mercy and compassion and care, claiming it for ourselves and denying it to others. Bonhoeffer saw that we could claim God’s grace and then go on living as though nothing had happened, living beyond God’s will and way, and blending into the world, living as though nothing at all of any consequence had really happened at all.

For Bonhoeffer, grace was not cheap but *costly*. He writes:

It is costly, because it calls us to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live. It is costly, because it condemns sin; it is grace, because it justifies the sinner. Above all, grace is costly, because it was costly to God, because it cost the life of God’s son – “you were bought with a price” – and because nothing can be cheap to us which is costly to God. Above all, it is grace because the life of God’s Son was not too costly for God to give in order to make us live. God did, indeed, give him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.³

So, what do we *have* to do? The answer is “nothing.” If we *have* to do something, then grace is not grace, because you cannot legalize or mandate a response to love.

But, when God’s grace and love are recognized and valued, a response comes forth naturally. When God’s mercy and forgiveness are experienced first-hand, life is – in fact – changed. When grace is recognized and received and appreciated, a response to that grace cannot be contained.

The response to God’s grace is discipleship. Discipleship means that we are willing to learn a new way of life. After all, a disciple is a learner – a student – an apprentice. Discipleship means living the life of compassion and understanding, in a world in which indifference and insensitivity rule the day. Discipleship means seeing the *other* as a

friend, as a sister or a brother, and not as an enemy or a rival. Discipleship means being aware of the needs of others the world fails to see and reaching out to them as God has reached out to us. Discipleship means gratitude in the face of dissatisfaction, humility in the face of arrogance, authentic living in the face of counterfeit existence.

And when we are not sure of what to do, or where to go, or how to respond to whatever life is offering, we have an example we can follow. When we look at how Jesus responded to the world around him, we have a pretty clear idea of how we are to respond to the world in which we live. When we are tempted to judge another, Jesus reminds us to take full inventory of our lives before we start casting stone. When we are ready to call another “unworthy,” Jesus reminds us that we may have some unworthiness of our own than needs confronting. When we are ready to condemn another because they are of a different heritage than ours, Jesus reminds us that, if we will look a little deeper, we will find that we are all God’s children. And when we are tempted to think that this life will be easy, Jesus asks us to look at his own death.

When God’s grace is appreciated and valued and treasured, the response will not be a cheapening of God’s gift, but a deep and profound response, which begins with authentic gratitude and sees all of life’s blessings as being at God’s disposal. It is exactly as Isaac Watts wrote in the final stanza of his famous hymn:

“love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all...”

The thing about grace is that it isn’t easy, it isn’t simple. it isn’t without its difficulties and challenges. An authentic response to grace is challenging and demanding and may be more than we bargained for. But the thing about grace is that it is real and launches us into the life we were intended to live on that day when God created all things – seen and unseen.

Oh, and one other thing. That word *grace* comes from the Latin word *gratia*, which means “thanks.” Grace and gratitude. A pretty powerful pair. And you really can’t have one without the other.

For now and evermore. Amen.

1.) Guthrie, Shirley C., Jr. *Christian Doctrine (Revised Edition)* p. 319

2.) Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Discipleship*, p. 3-4

3.) *Ibid*, p. 5