

Sola Gratia

November 5, 2017

For the next few weeks we are looking at the reawakening of men and women to the teaching of the Bible during the Reformation. Last Tuesday was the 500th anniversary of the day that Martin Luther nailed the 95 Thesis on the door in Wittenberg.

The Reformers summarized the truths of scripture rediscovered as:

Scripture Alone

Grace Alone

Faith Alone

Christ Alone

For the Glory of God Alone

Today we consider Sola Gratia—or Grace Alone.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time you are familiar with the most famous hymn written in the English language. It is the classic penned by John Newton called, *Amazing Grace*.

You know the song.

You know the words.

You know the tune.

*Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me.*

We can sing the song and yet not be amazed by grace. Is grace amazing anymore? If we rewrote the song to suit where we are most of the time we might sing—

*I'm indifferent to grace I know the sound
that saved a wretch like me.*

Are you indifferent to the grace of God given to you? If so, our goal this morning is to reacquaint ourselves with grace by listening to the voice of our savior and the quintessential story of the grace of God.

I like the Title—The story of Amazing Grace—you'll probably know it by its more famous title: The Prodigal Son.

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” ’ ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was

still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’ ” Luke 15:11-32

PRAY

Two Sons and a Father. We will meet them in turn.

The Younger Son—

The unnamed younger son came upon his father one day and asked for the share of the family property that was due him when his father died.

This is a grave insult because the younger son is saying, “I want what I would get from you if you were dead. In my mind you might as well be dead for all I care.”

Now, the father was not duty bound to give his younger son anything but verse 12 says,

And he divided his property between them.

That word, ‘property’ could be literally rendered ‘life.’ In a sense the younger son is saying, I want to get on with my own life. Let me take from your life and live my own life. I don’t need you. I don’t want you. But I want what you can give me.

The father was land-rich and cash poor. So to give the son his inheritance meant selling off family land. This land would have been in their family for generations and now at the whim of an impetuous, selfish young man the father impoverishes himself. He has to sell land and has to sell at a discount because he needs fast cash.

This was a destructive request.

Now it seemed that the family land and the family’s younger son were both lost forever.

The younger son strikes out on his new life, to get a fresh start (by the way there are no such things as completely fresh starts) and travels to ‘a far country.’

The younger son makes the perilous journey from a place he was loved and secure to a far country where he was used and insecure. But he had a good time.

He squandered all in what the KJV calls, ‘riotous living.’

Riotous living can only be financed for so long and soon the money ran out. And bad luck for the younger son, not only was he out of cash but there was a severe economic downturn.

A severe famine ravaged this faraway country and all her inhabitants were hungry. Among those was the younger son and he slowly began to ‘be in need.’

He looked and looked and looked and could not find a job. We know this by the sort of job that he took,

Vs. 15,

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.

This man man the younger son hired himself out to was a gentile (non-Jew) because a Jew was unable to own or tend to pigs.

And feeding pigs was condemned in no uncertain terms—because they were unclean.

This meant that the younger son was marked as one who kept pigs and was equal to those who had leprosy. It would be the near equivalent of you or me cleaning porta potties out by hand.

That is what it meant to tend pigs.

He was desperate to eat. Desperate to live.

How bad was it?

¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

These pods were probably from the area's locust trees—they were flat and had 10-12 seeds in them. Nothing anyone normally would want to eat.

He had hit rock bottom.

These pigs were better off than him. The younger son longs for a meal of unclean animals and cannot even have that. That is hungry and desperate.

You have to be pretty hungry if the food you feed to animals looks good. I've had a few dogs in my life and never have I been so hungry as to think—I wish I could have that.

But the younger son is in a state of rank desperation.

What is he to do?

Even in this far country he cannot escape the thought of his father back home. He realizes that even the servants of his father's household ate better than he was right now. So, he decides what to say and rehearses his speech—

¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”

Even this is asking a lot.

The boy knew Jewish law. He knew that any Jewish boy that lost their family's inheritance among the Gentiles and returned home would be completely cut off. The family and the community would perform a ritual called a Kezazah ceremony.

When any member of the community saw the boy he knew they would gather around him and shame him. The town would fill a pot full of burnt beans and break that pot by

forcfully throwing it down on the ground and shouting—
“You are now cut off from your people.”

Just as the boy could not put that pot back together and fix it, he had made such a mess of his life that it could not be remedied. The broken pot was a picture of the relationship broken beyond repair.

Surely, the boy had seen this in the past and to be asked to be treated as one of his father’s servants was asking more than anyone in the town would be seen as ridiculous.

But desperation is not the mother of sound plans.

So, the boys strikes back toward home. Surely he didn’t have much food and even putting one foot in front of the other to cover that ground must have been nearly more than he could do.

But he made it.

20 And he arose and came to his father.

The boy was coming into town ashamed. He wasn’t walking in—saying, “Hey, I’m back!” He knew the first townsfolk to see him would cement his shame by publicly rebuking the boy.

The shame he felt inside was about to be eclipsed by the shame that town was about to heap on him.

And then something happens that if you were one of Jesus’ original hearers you would say—that can never happen. What was that? A land owner running.

In that day servants ran. It was a sign of subjugation—when you were sent by your master with a message or a note you ran. Anyone who ran was sent by another and not his own.

But this father ran. And make no mistake, there was no regal way to run. To run in long flowing robes meant he had to hike them up so that he doesn't trip.

But that is what the father did.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

Why?

Do you see why? The father wanted any shame that the townsfolk would heap on the son to be put on him. He had to get to his son before the town did. He had to get to them before they started Kezazah. The Father had to get to the son before the people could yell—'you are now cut off.'

He couldn't let that happen.

So instead of all eyes focused on his prodigal son, the sprinting patriarch demands everyone's attention. This man ran like he was in a race and he was...he needed to get to his son before the others did.

The father hugged and kissed him. Even the son is surprised and taken aback. That speech that he had worked on doesn't come out so well—

²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The father does not even respond to his son—he is not even listening—he interrupts him. His father that ran sends his servants running—Here is the welcome he gives his son,

‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate.’

He was to be clothed in the best robe—heirs wore robes he is brought the best. He would be no servant to the father, he was a son.

He was to have a ring put on his finger—he could act and speak with his father’s authority. He would be no servant to the father, he was a son.

He was to have shoes put on his feet—slaves went barefoot, sons and masters had shoes. He would be no servant to his father, he was a son.

He was going to have a feast in his honor—his return was cause for great joy and he wanted others to celebrate. He would be no servant to his father, he was a son.

The father refused to treat the boy like a servant—he makes this clear in verse 24,

²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

There would be no ceremonial kezazah today. The father made sure of it. But the story is far from over.

The Older Son

The action shifts to the older son. Like the good son, he is doing exactly what he is supposed to do, working. He is in the family field working and tending to the crops and land.

At the end of a long day he trudges toward home and he began to hear the sounds of a party. Music and dancing and laughter and fun is echoing out from the house.

The older brother calls to one of the servants and asks—
what is going on? Why did a party break out?

27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’

Rage burned in the heart of the older brother. He was indignant that all this was to be made of a long lost loser who stumbled home.

Just as the Father went to the younger brother, the father leaves the party to go out to the older brother. The father begged the older boy to come in and he refused—you can feel the anger drip off every word,

‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

What are you doing?

The older brother not only refuses to celebrate he is angry—why? He feels he deserves favor from his father. Though the older brother never wandered to a far country he was farther from his father than his younger brother ever was.

Which are you?

The younger brother thought the love of the father was forever erased because of what he did.

The older brother thought the love of the father was forever earned by what he did.

And grace defies both.

That is why it is amazing.

The father is the hero of the story. He is the father that comes to both of his sons.

Younger brother: When the boy came to his senses and came to the father, he received the loving embrace he thought he would never receive. The younger brother sees the father who would absorb his shame and extend to him love and acceptance.

What is that?

Grace.

It was amazing precisely because it was completely unexpected. The younger son did nothing to earn the father's favor and yet he got it with wonderful abundance.

The older brother:

The boy who came in from the field and refused to come in celebrate, the father came to him also. The older brother didn't think that he needed grace from the father. He sees his father who foolishly extends grace to his stupid brother and never gave him what he deserved.

Grace is always offensive to those who think they don't need it.

Which are you?

Younger brothers are those of us who have run off in life and done rebelled and wasted time, energy and abilities. You can be apt to think that there is no way that you can be accepted by God. You have done too much. Guilt hangs over you like a fog.

But grace of God is amazing.

You think that you are undeserving and there is no way that you can be welcomed by a perfect and holy God. And that is true.

But what you must hear today is that our perfect and holy God has made a way. No one can run so far as to any far country as to be out of the reach of the grace of God.

Those of you who feel the guilt and unworthiness—you need to understand—it is real it is not imagined. BUT, even more real is the grace of God.

Grace is amazing because it is given to those that don't deserve it. Richard Sibbes gives some good counsel,

“Often think with thyself, What am I? A poor sinful creature; but I have a righteousness in Christ that answers all. I am weak in myself, but Christ is strong, and I am strong in him. I am foolish in myself, but I am wise in him. What I want in myself I have in him. He is mine, and his righteousness is mine, which is the righteousness of God-man. Being clothed with this, I stand safe against conscience, hell, wrath, and whatsoever. Though I have daily experience of my sins, yet there is more righteousness in Christ, who is mine, and who is the chief of ten thousand, than there is sin in me.” Richard Sibbes

Younger brothers who have the shadow of guilt across your life, that is not who you are. You are not your sin. You

are in Christ now. You have come to him and he will never send you away.

But I wonder if most of us in this room are older brothers.

Older brothers—

Some of us are older brothers. We have lived moral lives and are not apt to think that we need much. There is a danger in obedience, because we can think that we don't need much help.

But we need grace too.

These are those who never really wandered far away from the house. Those who never had a great outward show of sin. Those who who from the outside seemed like they loved and followed God.

Grace doesn't seem amazing because in the deepest parts of our hearts we don't think we need it. We think we are good and that God owes us a thing or two.

This is the great danger for those that have grown up in the church or have been Christians for any bit of time. Grace ceases to be amazing because we:

Have our devotions

Go to church

Pray

Worship

Give

Go on mission trips

Help the needy

And we think we have earned something. We would never admit that, but grace isn't as amazing as it once was. There is a disobedience in obedience. We think we earned

something. Like the older brother we think that we shouldn't have to put up with trouble of any kind.

Signs that you could be an older brother—

You think—how could this happen to me?

You think—I don't deserve this.

Why would God do this to me?

You don't forgive easily.

You have a list of people that you have not forgiven.

You say: He/she doesn't deserve my forgiveness.

You don't easily forgive because you have forgotten how much you have been forgiven of. Sure, you can sing Amazing Grace but it hasn't been amazing for years. You are indifferent to grace. And if you are honest you are indifferent to the love of Jesus.

Because you believe you deserve it.

There is a great danger for those who grew up in church or religion. You can think you are good, but you are not. You need Jesus and his love each and every day whether it seems like it or not.

PRAY

