

# Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)

By Vicar Jake Zabel

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen

Sermon text: Ephesians 2:1-9

*<sup>1</sup>And you were dead in the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—<sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. <sup>4</sup>But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Book of Concord: *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III.9*

*We are justified on the basis of **grace alone**, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness.*

Lord sanctify us by your truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

The chief article of the *Book of Concord* is the fourth article of the *Augsburg Confession* on Justification. Martin Luther said that, “justification is the article upon which the Church stands or fall.” (See FCSD Art.3.6) In the *Smalcald Articles* he wrote that, “the first and chief article is that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was handed over to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification’ ... Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever else exists were to pass away...on this article stands all that we teach and practice.” (SA Part II.1.1.5) And Philip Melancthon, in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, referred to

justification as “the most important of all Christian teaching.” (Apol. Art. 4.2, requoted in FCSD Art. 3.6)

This article teaches that before God we have been justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. These three “alones” or “solos” form the first three Solas of the Reformation: Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, and Solus Christus. In the lead up to Reformation 500, I will be doing a sermon series on the Solas of the Reformation. For today’s sermon, I will be focusing on Sola Gratia, or Grace Alone.

Our sermon text for today from Ephesians 2, declares that you have been saved “by grace” (v5,8). This is not your own doing, but it is a gift from God, not a result of works (v8-9).

We are not saved by our good works, our righteous deeds. We’re not justified before God because of our good behaviour, our politeness, our gentleness, our loving deeds or our kindness. No! We are justified by **GRACE ALONE**.

We have been justified on the basis of grace alone, not on account of anything we have done, but on account of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone.

Jesus Christ humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the Cross (Phil. 2:8). His death, His obedience, His keeping of God’s Law, has been reckoned to us. Christ’s righteousness has been freely given to us as a gift. For as St. Paul said, you have been justified by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. For in His divine forbearance, He passed over former sins, so that God may be just and that He may be the justifier of those who have faith in Christ (Rom. 4:24-26).

By the shedding of Christ’s blood, Jesus paid the price for our sins, He suffered the punishment we deserved. He took our guilt upon Himself and died in our place. Out of love and mercy God now grants Christ’s obedience to us, by grace. As a free gift from God we have received the righteousness of Christ.

As St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “for our sake He [God] made Him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we become the righteousness of God.”

We have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ, so that we now stand before God as righteous. We stand before God holy, innocent, and justified. For when God looks at each of us He no longer sees us as sinners, He no

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longer sees our sins. For our sins have been washed away by water and by blood, for we have been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14) and waters of Holy Baptism (1 Pet. 3:21). We have been forgiven. Our sins were given to Christ to bear on the Cross, and His obedience, His righteousness has been given to us, as a free gift from God. So that when God see us, He sees His beloved Son, He sees His Son's righteousness, His Son's obedience. By grace alone are you justified before God.

This teaching, that we are justified by grace alone, is why the Reformation happened. It was for this teaching that the early Lutherans debated, fought and in some cases even died for.

During the Diet of Augsburg in 1530, Emperor Charles V forbade the Lutheran princes from holding Lutheran services in Augsburg. In response to this, George, Margrave of Brandenburg, refused to concede and on behalf of the Lutheran princes he knelt before the Emperor declaring, "before I let anyone take from me the Word of God and ask me to deny my God, I will kneel before him and let them strike off my head."

Shaken by George's boldness and courage, the Emperor backed down and in broken German stated, "no cut off head, no cut off head."

This act of courage shows us just how important the teaching of grace alone is.

There is no other denomination than Lutheranism that teaches grace alone. Everyone other denomination teaches "grace plus".

When it comes to salvation, there are three ways of understanding the work of salvation. The first is human monergism (sole work) where humans do all the work. This teaching was promoted by Pelagius (360–418 AD) and condemned as a heresy called Pelagianism. Pelagius believed that Jesus only died for the sins you committed before you were a Christian. He taught that Baptism cleansed you of your sins, but that once you were baptized you had to earn your way to Heaven by keeping God's Law. This led many to be baptized on their deathbed. This teaching is unbiblical, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

The second way of understanding the work of salvation is synergism (working together), sometimes called semi-Pelagianism. This teaching believes that humans contribute to their salvation. Christ does some, or even

most of the work, but it's still up to you as a Christian to do something for your salvation. This is not grace alone, but grace plus works. This view uses the analogy of climbing a ladder. You don't have to climb all the way to the top, but you still have to climb a bit. Climb as far as you can and Jesus will climb down to you and meet you where you are. "Do you best, and Jesus will do the rest."

This is not justification by grace. St. Paul says that the Law brings wrath (Rom. 4:15), that if you are under the Law faith is null and the promise of God is void (4:14). Paul said that we are saved by grace and not by works, otherwise grace would not be grace (Rom. 11:6). If you add anything to grace it is no longer grace. If you add poison to a glass of water it is no longer water but poison.

No one can keep God's Law, for the Law demands absolute perfection. St. James the Just tells us "whoever keeps the whole Law but fails in just one point is guilty of breaking the whole Law." (James 2:10)

You cannot contribute anything to your salvation, because you are either under grace or under the Law, and unless you keep the entire Law you cannot be saved by the Law. By the works of the Law no one will be justified, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:21). The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law (1 Cor. 15:57). Paul says that the one who works, receives his wages (Rom. 4:4). And we know that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

Those who are under the Law will be judged by the Law (Rom. 2:12).

But for the one who does not work, but believes in Christ Jesus, who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:5). For the free gift of God is eternal life is Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23). This is the third and true way of understanding salvation, divine monergism. God does all the work. Through man came sin, death and decay, but through the God-Man Jesus Christ, came forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life. While we were still enemies of God, Christ died for us to reconcile us to God the Father and to grant us salvation (Rom. 5:10). While we were still dead in our trespasses God made us alive through Jesus Christ, we were saved by grace alone, and raised up and given newness of life, and the gift of eternal life (Eph. 2:1, 5-6).

We cannot do anything for our salvation, for without God's grace, we are enemies of God, haters of God, we reject God. We are dead in our trespasses,

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unable to do anything to save ourselves. A dead body cannot make itself alive again. Only God can make the dead live again (Rom. 4:17). As the *Formula of Concord* says in spiritual matters, humans can do nothing for their conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone, or block of wood or a piece of clay can. We cannot in and of ourselves by our own power, begin, effect or accomplish anything in regards to salvation, but the Holy Spirit enlightens, converts, rebirths, renews and draws us to God (FCSD Art. II.24). As Luther said in the *Small Catechism* I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, made me holy and kept me in true faith (SC Creed.6).

This is what grace alone means, God does all the work. Our salvation comes not by anything we do but by the power and work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25), the blood of Jesus cleanses us of all our sins (1 John 1:7). And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed (John 8:36). Sin has no dominion over you, since you are not under the Law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

This is why the Lutherans sought to reform the Church, because we alone preach grace alone. No other denomination teaches this, every other church teaches “grace plus”.

The Catholics teach infused grace. As the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* declares, the opponents (Roman Catholics) credit Christ with meriting us with a disposition towards God, an “initial grace” that makes it easier for us to love God. They believe that the human will can love God and keep His Law, the grace of God simply stimulates the will to do it more willingly (Apol. Art. IV.17). Basically God does the work of converting us to Christianity, but once we are Christian we still have to earn our salvation. As the *Apology* says, they bury Christ, they hide Him away, so that people do not use Him as a mediator and believe that through Him they have forgiveness of all their sins. Instead, the Catholics believe that we can merit forgiveness by our own works. As Melancthon wrote, they are only masquerading lest they appear to be outright Pelagians (Apol. Art. IV.18-19).

The Orthodox are no different, they believe that we are justified based on Christ’s indwelling in us. This seems like God does all the work, He is the One

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that comes to dwell in us. Except that this indwelling only saves us because it impels us to keep the Law. The Orthodox have mixed justification and sanctification together. The *Formula of Concord* dealt with this issue when a Lutheran theologian (Osiander) tried to bring this teaching into the Lutheran Church (note: this view is held today by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland). This teaching was described as such, “one party argued that the righteousness of faith...is the essential rightness of God, which is Christ Himself... who dwells in the elect through faith and impels them to do what is right and is therefore their righteousness.” (FCSD Art. III.2) They believe that through faith Christ dwells in us, but Christ’s indwelling just compels us to keep the Law and earn our salvation. The Lutheran Church rejects the view that, “faith looks not to Christ’s obedience alone but to His divine nature, as it dwells in us and works in us, and that through this indwelling ours sins are covered in God’s sight.” (FCSD Art. III.63)

As for other Protestant groups, they too reject grace alone, even though they claim to uphold it. The Protestant denominations can be divided into two theological traditions, Arminianism and Calvinism.

Arminians believe in decision theology. That Jesus does all the work of salvation, by we still have to make a decision for Christ, we have to choose Him, we have to accept His grace. Arminians turn faith into a good work. This view is wrong, because as I mentioned above, we cannot by our own reason, will, or strength believe, choose or accept God, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit who enlightens and enlivens faith within us. Without the Holy Spirit, I am an enemy of God and dead in my trespasses. God has to do all the work in order for me to ever believe in Him and receive the grace that He offers me. By my own strength I can only reject the grace of God, I cannot accept it. We can only receive God’s grace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Concerning decision theology, the *Formula of Concord* says thus, “concerning the expressions, ‘the human will is not idle in conversion but also does something,’ or ‘God draws, but He draws he who wills it’, these expressions were introduced to confirm that, contrary to the teaching of God’s grace, the natural free will can do something in conversion... this way of speaking is not compatible with the form of sound teaching but is contrary to it and ought rightly be avoided.” (FCSD Art. II.86)

As for Calvinism, they do teach divine monergism, that God does all the work. But they base their salvation in grace plus election. The Calvinists reject Objective Justification. The Calvinists deny that Jesus died for all people, but that He only does for those special people whom God had predestined before the Beginning of Creation.

This is unbiblical, for God does not desire the death of the wicked, but wishes that they turn to Him in repentance (Ezek. 18:23,32, 33:11). God desires all people to be saved and to come to the true knowledge of Him (1 Tim. 2:4). God calls all people to repentance (Acts 17:30). Jesus promises to draw all people to Himself (John 12:32). For God so loved **the world** He sent His only begotten Son (John 3:16). On Him was laid the iniquity of all of us (Isa. 53:6). For Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of **the world** (John 1:29).

Jesus did all the work, and through His death all of us have been forgiven. Jesus won salvation for everyone, even those who reject God's will and damn themselves through their rejection (Mark 16:16, John 3:18).

The Calvinist technically believes in salvation by grace alone, for God predestined them through no work of their own. Yet the Calvinist does not know for certain who is and isn't part of the elect. Thus, the Calvinist looks for assurance in their good works as proof that they are part of the elect. The Calvinist does not look for assurance in the Word of God or in the Sacraments; they don't look to the Cross as evidence of their salvation. Instead they look to their election for salvation and to their works as evidence of their election. Thus they too base their salvation in grace plus works.

And many other modern Protestant groups do the same. Instead of looking to Christ alone, they look at their own works. Pietists look to their moral purity, Missionalists look to growth in numbers and success in mission, Pentecostals look to their miraculous gifts and speaking in tongues, those who follow Joel Osteen and the Prosperity Gospel look to their success in business and their wealth.

All of them have turned their eyes away from Jesus and towards themselves, they do not teach grace alone, but grace plus.

This is why we're Lutheran. Not because we're perfect, but because of the exact opposite. We're Lutheran because we know we're imperfect, we're

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sinners, we cannot keep God's Law. We're Lutheran because the Lutheran Church is the only Church that teaches the pure Word of God, that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Look not to yourselves, look not at your own works, instead look to Jesus, because He alone is your salvation (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works. Amen.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. (Phil. 4:23)

#### PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord our God, You are our strength and our joy, for everything You do is marked by kindness and love. Because You are gracious, we trust in You and offer You our prayers.

We thank and praise You for all Your kindness to us: for blessing us with life, for equipping us with all our powers of body and soul, for giving us the ability to be useful, for permitting us to enjoy Your creation, and for surrounding us with the warmth of human relationships in every facet of life.

We confess our sins before You, repent of them, and earnestly turn from them. Do not look on us in anger, for Jesus' sake. We praise You above all else for Your grace in Christ Jesus. You have sent Your Son to die on the cross, and have raised Him in power and glory, to provide all the riches of our salvation. In Him You have given us free pardon for all our sins, the strength to overcome evil, and the sure hope of eternal life.

We rejoice in the death of Your Son, through which you have been reconciled to us, so that we may approach You as a God of love. Comfort us with Your free forgiveness, and fill us with the new life of the Spirit. Help us to be alert and to stand firm in faith in every temptation and test, so that we may resist Satan and His evil tricks, and hold our ground against all evil.

Be gracious to Your Church, O God, that it may seek the lost, lift up the fallen, comfort the broken-hearted, and heal the afflicted. Enable Your pastors and people to proclaim with courage and conviction the message of life in Christ Jesus, and to declare to all people Your mighty acts of judgment and mercy. Cause growth among us, through Your powerful Word.

Reveal Your power to all lands and nations. Remind people everywhere that You are the Lord of all history, that You judge the leaders of the nations, and that You have the power to break bows, shatter spears, and destroy all human might. Grant that all people may turn to You and follow Your truth.

Be the heavenly guest in all our homes. Move all families to trust You in everything, and to love and serve each other, until that day comes when You call us from our homes on earth to live with You in our heavenly home for ever.

Bless all who are in any need of body or soul. Teach them to humble themselves under Your mighty hand, trusting that You remove all burdens in Your own good time. Teach them to place all their worries on You, and assure them of Your infinite understanding and loving care.

Gracious God, since You have called us to share eternal glory in Christ, make us strong, and make our lives holy. Hear our prayers for the sake of Jesus, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 28:5-9

<sup>5</sup> Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the temple of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> The prophet Jeremiah said: "Amen! May the LORD do this! May the LORD make your words, which you have prophesied, come true, and restore the articles of the temple of the LORD and all the exiles from Babylon to this place!" <sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, please listen to this Message, which I am speaking directly to you and to all the people! <sup>8</sup> 'From ancient times the prophets who preceded you and me

prophesied war, calamity, and the plague against many countries and great kingdoms. <sup>9</sup> The prophet who prophesies peace is recognised as the prophet whom the LORD has sent when the Message of the prophet comes true."

Romans 7:1-13

<sup>1</sup> Or do you not know, fellow-Christians (for I am speaking to people who know the Law) that the Law controls a person for only as long as he is alive? <sup>2</sup> For the woman who has a husband has been bound by the Law to her husband while he is alive. However, if her husband dies, she has been released from the Law

that binds her to her husband. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, while her husband is alive, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man. However, if her husband dies, she is free from the Law, with the result that she is not an adulteress if she marries another man. <sup>4</sup> Therefore, fellow-Christians, you too have been put to death in relation to the Law through the body of Christ, with the result that you have begun to belong to Another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit to God. <sup>5</sup> For, while we were in the sinful human nature, the sinful passions that were aroused by the Law were at work in our members, so that we produced fruit for death. <sup>6</sup> However, now we have been released from the Law, because we have died to what we were being bound by, with the result that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

<sup>7</sup> What shall we say, then? Is the Law sin? Certainly not! Rather, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. For I would not have known covetousness if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet!" <sup>8</sup>

However, sin took an opportunity through the Commandment, and produced in me every kind of covetousness. For sin is dead without the Law. <sup>9</sup> Once I used to be alive without the Law; but, when the Commandment came, sin became alive, and I died. <sup>10</sup> So the very Commandment that was intended to lead to life was found in my case to lead to death. <sup>11</sup> For sin took an opportunity through the Commandment, deceived me, and through the Commandment killed me. <sup>12</sup> Therefore the Law is holy, and the Commandment is holy, righteous, and good. <sup>13</sup> So did this good thing cause death for me? Certainly not! Rather, in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it was producing death for me through what is good, so that sin might become extremely sinful through the Commandment.

Matthew 10:34-42

<sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth! I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> A person's enemies will be those in his own home.

<sup>37</sup> “Anyone who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me, and anyone who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>38</sup> The person who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. <sup>39</sup> The one who has found his life will lose it, but the one who has lost his life for My sake will find it.

<sup>40</sup> “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me

receives Him who has sent Me. <sup>41</sup> He who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward. He who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. <sup>42</sup> Whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I tell you, will certainly not lose his reward.”