
BY GRACE I'M SAVED, GRACE FREE AND BOUNDLESS

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, 2017

Ephesians 2:4-10

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Ephesians 2:4-10: ⁴ **However, God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us,** ⁵ **also made us, even when we were dead in trespasses, alive with Christ. It is by grace that you have been saved.** ⁶ **Moreover, in Christ Jesus, God raised us with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms,** ⁷ **in order to show, in the coming ages, the immeasurable riches of His grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus.** ⁸ **For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God,** ⁹ **not of works, that no one may boast.** ¹⁰ **For He has made us what we are, creating us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance, in order that we may live in them.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

We all know that on October 31, 1517, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed a paper to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. There was nothing unusual about that, because in those days, the church door served as the town's bulletin board. If someone wanted to debate an issue publicly, he would make it known by nailing a note on the church door. But the particular notice written by Luther was quite unusual compared to the commonly accepted beliefs and practices of that time. That paper, referred to as the Ninety-Five Theses, began the Reformation, a bloodless, worldwide revolution that continues to have repercussions today.

The subject to be debated publicly was the sale of indulgences. As we move closer to celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation this coming

October, today we will briefly examine the controversy in Luther's day concerning indulgences. Then, on the basis of our comforting Scripture text, we will reaffirm the central tenet of God's Word and the Christian faith that salvation comes only by God's grace, for Christ's sake, through faith.

St. Paul in our text categorically states again and again that we are saved for time and eternity by grace alone: **⁴ However, God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, ⁵ also made us, even when we were dead in trespasses, alive with Christ. It is by grace that you have been saved. ⁶ Moreover, in Christ Jesus, God raised us with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms, ⁷ in order to show, in the coming ages, the immeasurable riches of His grace by being kind to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, that no one may boast.**

It was the selling of indulgences - God's pardon - that caused Luther to write his Ninety-Five Theses. The preaching, selling, and buying of indulgences were a central part of late medieval religious practice. Many so-called theologians agreed that while Baptism had washed away the penalties for original sin, Christians still had "to do what was in them" in order to be saved. According to this view, death brought believers to purgatory. The stain of sins that remained on their records - particularly those that were unacknowledged and therefore unconfessed - was purged from them there before they were presented to St. Peter and Christ at the gates of heaven. To be "indulged" a sin before death meant simply to have its penalties pardoned by the church and therefore to be released from paying for it in purgatory. As with confession and penance, all that was required was some evidence of a sinner's sincerity.

In purgatory, the dead suffered under a severe disability and yet had a distinct advantage over those who were still living. On the one hand, they could no longer atone for their sins by going on a pilgrimage, saying several "hail Mary's," purchasing an indulgence, or the like. On the other hand, they were also incapable of committing any more sins. The plenary (full) indulgence was therefore especially important for them, because it wiped away all sins committed since Baptism. At least in theory, therefore, if a plenary

indulgence were acquired on their behalf by someone whose heart was properly inclined, their accounts with God would be finally and fully squared.

At the time of Luther, Pope Leo X wanted to complete St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. Much money needed to be gathered before such a mammoth project could be completed, so Pope Leo ruled that indulgences could be sold to raise the necessary funds. Chief among the pardon peddlers in Germany was a monk by the name of John Tetzel. The people of Germany held these indulgences in high esteem. Tetzel was received in town after town as though he were a mighty monarch. Bells tolled, organs sounded, and a red cross bearing the pope's coat of arms was erected. Tetzel claimed to have saved more souls with his indulgences than the Apostle Peter had with his sermons. He had a catchy little rhyme that could be translated as this: "*Once the coin into the coffer clings, a soul from purgatory heavenward springs!*" Since many thought they did not need to repent of their sins and believe in Christ alone for mercy, they could keep on sinning, buy some indulgences, be forgiven, and then sin some more. Thus people placed their trust and confidence in indulgences, not in Jesus Christ.

Luther was enraged when he heard what was going on. Not only were the souls for whom Christ died at stake but also the Gospel of Christ and the Christian Church. Luther protested against the sale of indulgences as a practice that threatened to destroy a Christian's relationship with God - the relationship Christ made possible when He died for all sins and rose again. That relationship is established in Baptism, when the Holy Spirit puts faith into a person's heart. With faith in Christ the person baptised is born again and becomes a child of God.

"It is by grace that you have been saved," Paul says. Because we are sinners, we cannot save ourselves. In his Letter to the Romans Paul had stated that "*There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*" (Rom. 3:22-23). King Solomon, many, many years before had declared, "*There is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins,*" (Eccl. 7:20). That is a bleak picture! Our sinful nature results in sins of *commission* - the things we do, say, and think that are offenses against God and violations of his Law. James writes, "*After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin,*"

(James 1:15). Moreover, all of us are guilty of sins of *omission*; we don't do the things God wants us to do. Again, James says, "*Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins,*" (James 4:17). Considering all the sins we commit; can anyone think for a moment that we could save ourselves? We need to realise and understand that man has no ability whatsoever to save himself. Rather, his salvation comes from complete dependence on the grace of God. We are saved solely by God's grace, His undeserved love for us in Christ.

Salvation now and forever is a free gift. It is unearned, not worked for, not striven for, undeserved, unmerited. It is free! You may think there is nothing in life that is free. We often hear "*There is no such thing as a free lunch.*" We always look for the price tag. Because most people believe you have to pay for everything, many hope that they might get to heaven that way too. Thanks be to God that the greatest blessing a person can ever receive - the forgiveness of sins - is completely free! To be sure, it did cost a bundle. Someone did have to pay for it. But that person is Jesus Christ, the only One who could offer His perfect life in payment for our sins. God emphasises in our text that we are saved only - and saved completely - by His grace. Paul makes that crystal clear when he says: "**This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God,⁹ not of works, that no one may boast.**" How much clearer could Paul be in stating that our eternal salvation, our relationship with God for time and eternity, is not at all dependent on what we do, but on what God has done for us through His Son, Jesus Christ? And yet, so many humans in their sinful rebellion against God, continue to cling foolishly to the hope that their character, their life, their morality, and their good works have some worth or value that might enable them to gain heaven. King Solomon was right: There really is nothing new under the sun.¹ Ever since the human race fell into sin, people have tended to think that their salvation is self-made, not God-made and God-given. People today continue to cling to the hope that their good works will outweigh their evil works, that their goodness is superior to their sinfulness, or that even though we fail miserably, God might in the end reward us at least for our efforts, if not for our accomplishments.

¹ Ecclesiastes 1:9

How sad. There is absolutely nothing that any of us can do to gain heaven. Salvation is entirely a gift of God. “⁸ **For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, that no one may boast.**” When Paul reminds us that salvation is a gift, he means exactly that. A gift is something given freely, for which the giver expects no payment. We all receive gifts on special occasions in our lives. Take a birthday gift, for example. What did you do to deserve to be born? You receive a birthday gift simply when the calendar comes around to the date again, not because you do something to earn it. Isn't it true that when you receive a gift, it is because someone loves you? So it is with the gift of salvation. Salvation is by grace, an undeserved gift freely given by God without the contribution of any human works.

Paul furthermore states that we are saved by grace **through faith**. This is not faith in one's self, in one's good works, morality, or right living. By faith, Paul means the gift that the Holy Spirit gives to us when we are baptised into Christ, through the hearing of God's Word. While the Spirit can create faith in anyone as He pleases, adult or infant,² yet He has promised to work in the water of Baptism. In faith we trust in Jesus, our Saviour from sin. It is because of what Jesus Christ has done for us that we are saved. When our Saviour agonisingly uttered the words from the cross, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*”³, He was suffering the punishment we deserved that we might have forgiveness. In that wonderful chapter of Isaiah 53, we are told that “*The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all,*” (v.6). We rebelled from God in rebellion, yet God placed our guilt on the only One who stayed beside Him, the Servant. One innocent Lamb remained, and that Lamb of God received the punishment of the flock that fled.

The greatest transaction in the world was being made. On Good Friday, the Father transferred the sin of the entire world - yours and mine - onto the Lord Jesus Christ. We deserved to be punished by God for our sins. But by God's grace alone, the Father punished His Son instead. He died for our sins, once for all.

² Romans 10:17

³ Matthew 27:46

Salvation by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone, is the basis of our daily Christian life. Paul in our text reminds and encourages us: “¹⁰ **For He has made us what we are, creating us in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared in advance, in order that we may live in them.**” The love God has for us motivates and energises us to live our daily life for Him. With our new God-given spiritual life, we are indeed able to respond to God’s will. We are able, albeit imperfectly, to do what God wants. It is not that we have to but, rather, that *we want* to do God’s will. The good works that flow from faith are simply an opportunity to show our appreciation for all that God in Christ has done for us. It would be hard to improve on the apostle John’s concise analysis: “*We love [God] because He first loved us,*” (1 John 4:19).

But even the good deeds we do are no basis for boasting. They’re really not our own doing; we’re simply being given the opportunity to do good things, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.

Paul has certainly made his point: Our salvation is totally and completely the gift of a gracious God. We did nothing, and we have no grounds for boasting.

What a privilege God gives us, to live in praise to Him for all that He, by grace, has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us! As we sing our next hymn, “By Grace I’m Saved” ponder in your heart just how much this means to you. All praise to Him alone! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord of all power and grace, since Your eyes watch over the righteous and Your ears listen to their cries, hear our prayers as we come before You in gratitude and praise for all Your mercies.

We remember our great sinfulness before You, O Lord, and confess it with repentant hearts. Do not treat us as we deserve, but forgive us because of Your limitless love, that we may experience anew the joy of Your salvation and always live to Your praise.

We thank You for the daily miracles of Your care and love. Help us to realise always that You open Your hand and satisfy the needs of all Your creation and fill our lives with everything good, and make us thankful people.

We praise You especially for the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ, whom You have sent to be the Saviour of the world. Grant that we may believe in Him with all our hearts, honour Him as our Lord, and live under Him in the kingdom He has established. Help us to obey His words eagerly, to love Him truly, and to serve Him joyfully.

Continue to enlighten our lives by Your Holy Spirit, so that they may produce the abundant fruits of righteousness. Enable us to grow in knowledge of Your truth, in self-control in our lives. Give us a firm faith, pious minds, pure hearts, affection and sympathy for all our fellow-Christians, and love for all people.

Raise up pastors who will be true fishers of men. Help all Your people to put aside human opinions and selfish concerns, and to follow Your Son wherever He leads them. Give unity of spirit to Your people. Uphold those Christians who are suffering for the sake of their faith; and give them strength and courage.

We pray for the nations of the earth. Put down tyranny and terrorism. Raise up leaders who acknowledge You and Your will. Bless our country Australia. Lead its people pursue all that is good, and to put aside all that is evil. Frustrate the designs of those who want to promote murder through abortion and euthanasia.

Hear the cry of the suffering. Help them in body and spirit, and save them for Your mercy's sake. And, as we are only pilgrims in this world, guide and keep us, and bring us all at last to our heavenly home.

Receive these prayers, which we offer in the name of the author of life, Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not go back there without watering the earth and

causing it to bring forth and to sprout, so that it gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater,¹¹ so My Word will be, which goes out of My mouth. It will not return to Me without results, but it will accomplish what I desire and be successful in what I have sent it to do.”

¹² For you will go out with joy, and be led out in peace. The mountains and the hills will break into shouts of joy in your presence, and all the trees in the field will clap their hands.¹³ A cypress tree will grow up instead of the thornbush, and a myrtle tree will grow up instead of the stinging nettle. This will also make a name for the LORD and become an everlasting sign, which will not be cut off.

Romans 8:12-17

¹² Therefore, fellow-Christians, we are in debt, not to the sinful nature, to live according to the sinful nature.¹³ For, if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die. However, if, by the Spirit, you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.¹⁴ For all who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s children.¹⁵ For you have not received a spirit of slavery again, to make you afraid, but you have received the Spirit, who adopts, by whom we cry, “Abba, Father!”¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirits that we are God’s children,¹⁷ and that, if we are children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ, since indeed we

suffer with Him, in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the sea.² However, such large crowds gathered around Him that He got into a boat and sat in it, while the entire crowd was standing on the shore.³ Then He told them many things in parables. He said, “Look! A sower went out to sow.

⁴ While he was sowing, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.⁵ Other seeds fell on the stony places, where they did not have much soil. Because their soil was not deep, the seeds came up quickly.⁶ However, when the sun rose, they were scorched, and, because they had no root, they withered.⁷ Other seeds fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them.⁸ However, other seeds fell on the good soil and produced grain, some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times as much.⁹ Let the one who has ears listen!” ...

¹⁸ “Therefore hear the parable of the sower!¹⁹ When anyone hears the Word of the kingdom but does not understand it, the Evil One comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This one is he who has been sown along the path.²⁰ The one who has been sown on the stony places is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy;²¹ but he does not have root in himself. He

lasts for only a short time, and, when trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, he immediately falls away.²² The person who has been sown among thorns is one who hears the Word, but the worry of the world and the seduction that comes from riches choke the Word, and it does not produce anything.²³ However, the person who has been sown on the good soil is the one who hears the Word and understands it, and so produces and yields, sometimes a hundred, sometimes sixty, and sometimes thirty times as much.”