

Sola Gratia: By Grace Alone
From the series: New Wine for Century 21

Text: Matthew 20:15

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
October 27, 1996

Transcription of the spoken sermon

By Grace Alone.

Christ Community has been marked for 25 years by grace. Grace has been its hallmark. Some of you have been here all that time, and you know it, and probably you've gotten sick of hearing me say it. Nancy has threatened to put it on my tombstone - Richard "Grace" Rhem. One string on the banjo. But, you know, I flip it around so often, I say it in so many different ways, I say it so continually that maybe it would be good just to stop for a minute and say, "Do you know what grace really is?" And, if you happen to be new here and you don't know the eruption of Christ Community in its early history, maybe you don't understand the context of my overuse of grace.

So, let me take just a minute to say that there are really just two kinds of religion in the world. The first and most common kind is a religion by the performance principle: you do certain things and you are rewarded. You say certain prayers, follow certain rituals, execute certain practices, live in a certain way, add it all up and say, "Grant me my reward. I deserve your salvation, O God, Your favor. I have merited it. I have earned it." That's what most religion is, and there's something deep in the human person that likes it that way, because we would much rather pay our own way. Wouldn't we rather not be indebted to anyone?

The other kind of religion is a religion of grace. There you get the favor of God, undeserving, not through doing something, executing certain work of righteousness, offering certain prayers, being regular in worship, tithing your income, name what you will. The grace principle is that free bestowal of God's favor on us for nothing in ourselves, simply because God, at heart, is love, and that loving soul of the universe overflows in a fountain of grace because grace is simply love active, love poured out. The religion of grace is a religion of those who, through no effort of their own, no doing of their own, no achievement, no merit, but simply because God is the way God is, are freely accepted, given the gift of life and eternal life.

Just two kinds of religions - either a do-it-yourself brand, or that which God does for you, quite apart from yourself. And Christ Community has been marked by the latter. And, in being marked by the latter, it has been consistent with, I believe, that understanding of God that came to expression in Jesus. Jesus knew human nature pretty well, and he knew that it was human nature to think somehow or other we could bargain with God and cook up a deal with God and carry our own weight with God, and so he told a story, as he always did, the familiar story of the farmer who goes down to the unemployment office early in the morning, first watch, gathers all those that are available and sends them out into the field after bargaining with them for a day's wage. A fair day's wage, a fair day's labor. They go off and begin their work. But, he stops by the unemployment office two or three more times, at noon, at 3 o'clock, each time sees a few stragglers, sends them out into the field never saying well, let's bargain on the wage, just "Go, work." Along about five o'clock, there's only an hour to whistle time, he sees a few stragglers there and he said, "What are you guys doing?" They say, "No one hired us." He said, "Well, don't be worthless. Go out and finish the day in the field."

Now, the whistle blows; they all come for their checks. He begins with the last bunch who've only been there for an hour, and he gives them the amount that he had agreed in the beginning in the morning with the first workers. And then those that came at three, and those that came at noon - they all get a day's wage. So, those who had come early in the morning were beginning to think, "Well, I wonder what kind of a bonus we'll get." And they got exactly what they'd bargained for - a day's wage. Well, that really upset them, and it would have upset me, and it would have upset you, too, because that's not fair. I mean, their complaint was justified. "Look, we labored all day; we labored through the heat of the day, and here we get no more than those who came the last hour." And the farmer says to them, "Oh, really? That makes you angry, eh? Does my generosity make you angry? Have I done you any wrong? Did we not agree? Did I not pay you a fair day's wage? Is it not my right to do with my own as I will?"

Jesus blows your mind, doesn't he? I mean, that's not fair; that wouldn't work in the real world, would it? Lucky if you came at five, of course. Jesus was saying, "Look, folks, God is not human. God is God. And you can't put God into our little boxes and box God up as though God is restricted to our ways of merit and reward, of work and reward. God is God, and God is grace, and grace doesn't keep score; grace doesn't keep books. Grace is wild and unruly." And thereby Jesus was suggesting that there is a mystery about the love and grace of God that will never be at human disposal, never be for human manipulation, never be for human control or institutional control.

Krister Stendahl gives me some insight into that parable, why Matthew selected that one to tell. Matthew was writing to Jewish Jesus people. These were people who had been a part of Israel throughout all of their lives and, in fact, reflected the generations of Israel's service of God. And now there were some Gentiles

coming into that community and there were those who had been there all the time who had said, "Well, what are these folks doing coming in? Certainly they can't be given the same status we have." And so, Matthew tells the story that Jesus told to say, "Look, the Gentiles, those who came at five in the afternoon, are received equally and treated the same way by the all-merciful God, because God makes no distinction." And Paul picked that up, as well, and he began to see that God's grace is embracing the Gentile as he struggled with that in his Letter to the Romans, as we saw last week. He finally came to see that God was creating one new humanity, the same grace of the same God, now for the whole wide world, and it caused him to say, "To God be glory forever and ever."

It's the word that Martin Luther picked up. This is Reformation Sunday, and we remember the Reformation of the Church in the 16th century and the catalytic event that ignited it and sent it into orbit was Luther's own personal experience. Luther was one of those odd ducks that took God seriously, and he couldn't find any peace with God. He was a part of his Roman Catholic tradition, he became a monk, he was a serious biblical scholar, and he was a part of the Augustinian Order, which did their prayers seven times throughout the course of 24 hours. He beat himself, pummeled himself, denied himself, sought through all of the means available in the piety of his day and the institutional forms that were there, to get a sense of having peace with God. And you know how it is when you're trying to measure up, when you're working on the performance principle, when you're trying to impress a parent or a spouse or a colleague, when you feel somewhat insecure and inadequate and so you keep running faster and trying harder and jumping higher? Doesn't work, does it? You never, never get to the point where you say, "Now, that's enough."

So, Luther struggled. He had this intense, personal struggle. He felt the anger of God, not the peace of God. He came to his confessor one day and confessed that he was struggling so hard and couldn't find peace, and the confessor said, "Martin, you must love God." And Martin said, "Love God? I hate God!" Because, you see, try as he would, he could never come to that sense that he had done the last thing that would give him that peace with God, and in his biblical study he contemplated Paul's statement to the Romans: "The just shall live by their faith, the just shall live by their faith." Finally, in a moment of illumination, one of those miracles that happens now and again, Martin Luther found that registering with him: The just shall live by faith, not by what they do, not by the prayers they offer, the rituals they do, the good works they offer - not by anything they do. The just will live by their faith because salvation is a gift; it is grace! It is given by God, not by what we do, but by what God has done. Martin Luther experienced a moment of grace.

I love the way Paul Tillich expresses the experience of grace:

It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility and our lack of direction and composure have

become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted. You are accepted." Accepted by that which is greater than you and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now. Perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now. Perhaps later you will much. Do not seek for anything. Do not perform anything. Do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted. If that happens to us, we experience grace.

And that experience, again Stendahl said, in Martin Luther has become the paradigm for the whole western Protestant tradition, moving away from the concept of God having a people, to that very personal relationship between the person and God by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But, that personal experience for Luther did not remain just personal, because he looked about him at the Church, he looked at the structures of the Church of his day and he saw the corruption, he saw the abuse of people, he saw the Church selling forgiveness, for God's sake! They were building St. Peter's in Rome; they needed a lot of gold, and so the Pope would write an Indulgence. For a little bit of money you could take care of the past. For a little more money, you could even take care of tomorrow. For a little bit of money you could spring free from Purgatory the loved ones you had lost. It became a terrible system, greedy and abusive.

Luther had experienced grace. He knew the grace of God and salvation had nothing to do with the Church somehow or other funneling this grace, holding the spigot, turning it on and off, depending on the flow of gold. And so, he pounded his 95 Theses on the door of the church at Wittenberg. Thesis 62 said, "The Church has its treasure not in its wealth and its power, but in the Holy Gospel, the Holy Gospel that speaks of the free grace of God which is not for sale." He didn't want to break the Church. He did want to change the Church, because he could see that the Church had encrusted that grace and made it a commodity to be sold, abusing the people. So he made his protest, which eventuated, because the institutional church structures would not bend, in brokenness. The protest burst open into the Reformation of the church, and we are the children of the Reformation five centuries later.

Luther's question probably isn't your question, at least with its intensity. I listened to Harvard professor, Harvey Cox, who's had generations of student go through his course on "Jesus at Harvard." He always asks them to tell him who Jesus is for them, and he says Generation X (that's the group about 22 to 35) simply is not buying the institutional church package as you and I have. He said these young people are picky, they're selective, they're deeply spiritual, they're deeply hungry and they admit they're confused. I don't know what their question is, but I know they're human and I know that down deep they long for meaning. I don't know if the mainline church is going to be able to fill the bill. It may even be

that the mainline church as we've known it, has to fall on real hard times in order for God to get a foothold and create some newness that will be able to capture the imagination of the generation yet unborn. I'm not really worried about that. That's always the trouble with institutional church leaders - they worry about preserving what they have and perpetuating it into the future. And then we get nervous and anxious and become coercive. We get abusive and manipulative, and we forget that, after all, finally, it is the good and gracious God Who will continue, by God's Spirit, to draw to God's self all those who hunger and thirst.

I don't know just what the question is. I don't know just what the configuration of the future will be. Someone came into the church this morning and said to me, "You know, I walked under that banner, 'Unleashed for Ministry,' and I thought to myself, 'That has never been so appropriate as it is this year.'" Unleashed for Ministry. Free of structures that are anachronistic and baggage that simply gets in the way. A community of people who've been marked by grace. Out of Luther's experience and the Reformation of the 16th century, the hallmark was *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone. Not by institution, not by law, not by some abusive prescription - by grace alone, because God is grace and God will grace, because it is God's nature to grace. If only we could put out sails to catch the fresh breezes of the Spirit to find which way the ark of salvation should be moving into Century 21.

Paul, in his Letter to the Corinthians, appealed to them and to Corinth to join in an offering for those who were suffering in Jerusalem. But, he was very clear - there's no command; there's no demand; this isn't a tax, but you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, though he was rich, yet for your sakes, he became poor that you through his poverty might be rich. In the light of that grace, may I call you to a meaningful, significant investment of your life into the ongoing movement of the kingdom of God? All is grace. Salvation from God and the response of God's people, and the way we relate to each other, and the way we govern each other - the whole Church must be marked, characterized by the ambience of grace. If not, it's become a human product; it's become an institution that will too soon become abusive and coercive.

Grace frees. Grace gives wing, and you are a people who have responded to grace, and who have found that the most meaningful investment of life is in that gracious self-giving in return. So, I don't know the questions for tomorrow. I don't know the taste of the new wine or the shape of the wineskin for Century 21. But, I know this - there is no people poised more poignantly to find the taste, to find the shape and set it free than a people who have been set free.

Sola Gratia! Sola Deo Gloria! Hallelujah!