Title: Grace Alone (Sola Gratia)

Series: Reformation Solas

Scriptures: John 11:17-44; Ephesians 2:1-10

“*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*” {Ephesians 4.4-7}

Our ‘Mission’ as the Reformed Church of Christchurch is summarised in these words – “*To make and equip disciples of Jesus, our Saviour, who joyfully serve and glorify God*”.

How exactly are we going to make this happen?

How are we going to ensure that people come to salvation in the Reformed Church of Christchurch and that our membership numbers continue to grow?

For example, what changes should we make to our worship services to make them perhaps more appealing and exciting for those who visiting us?

In other words, what are the most efficient techniques and methods for making someone a Christian? {pause}

Should we perhaps end each service with an ‘altar call’ in which the preacher invites people to come forward and recite a ‘sinner’s prayer’ and so ‘get saved’?

Are you getting uncomfortable with these questions? I hope so!

Why? Because these are the **wrong questions** to ask. They are based on an old, false idea, often revisited in church history, that people are saved, at least in part, by an act of their own free will.

Back in the 4th century AD, the monk and theologian Pelagius believed and taught that man had not been entirely corrupted by Adam’s fall and that humans could, by their own free will, do works that pleased God, and thus be saved.

As we heard last week, when we considered ‘Sola Fide’ – the Protestant Reformation doctrine of ‘by faith alone’, the Roman Catholic church teaches that salvation is by faith plus works. In other words, what you do does make you more or less eligible to be saved.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, a theologian called Jacobus Arminius taught that humanity is tainted by sin, but no so much that we cannot cooperate with God’s free offer of grace.

Charles Finney, 19th century leader of the ‘2nd Great Awakening’ in the USA, similarly taught that an exercise of human will is the essential step in a person being saved.

Many evangelical churches today follow this teaching and regularly call people to ‘make a decision for Jesus’ in order to be saved.

In contrast, the Bible clearly teaches that sinners are saved by grace alone.

In this sermon we are going to look at this key Biblical doctrine under three headings from our text in Ephesians 2:

a) God’s grace makes us alive

b) God’s grace unites us with Christ

c) God’s grace reveals his kindness

1. **God’s Grace makes us alive**

How do you know if a person is dead?

Answer, in the developed world, by consulting a medical professionals who would know how to determine legally if a person has died. Two categories of legal death are:

Irreversible cessation of heartbeat and breathing (cardiopulmonary death).

Irreversible cessation of functions of the brain (‘[brain death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_death)’).

We know from John’s gospel that Lazarus of Bethany had died of an illness. Jesus plainly told his disciples ‘*Lazarus has died*’ (John 11:14). Jesus was deeply moved and greatly troubled by the death of a man he had loved. He wept (John 11.35). Lazarus’s body had been placed in a tomb, where it had lain for 4 days – a long enough period of time for his flesh to begin to decay. Then Jesus came and cried out with a loud voice “*Lazarus come out*”.

Think for a moment about the **practical problems** this presents: A dead person cannot hear. A dead person cannot think in order to respond to an instruction. A dead person cannot move – cannot get up, cannot walk.

Yet, Lazarus did hear, he did respond, he did move. He came out of the tomb, **not because** he had made himself alive again, but because God had given life where there had been death.

This was a physical, bodily, resurrection which parallels the spiritual bringing to life about which the Apostle Paul writes to the believers in Ephesus. He says in v4 “*even when we were dead in our trespasses, {God} made us alive”* **Just as** Lazarus was not merely sick in the tomb, not in a prolonged faint, not simply unconscious, but **completely dead** – with no heartbeat and no brain functions for 4 days, So **similarly** people like the Ephesians, like all other descendants of Adam, like you and me, we are all naturally spiritually dead, separated from God as a result of our ‘trespasses and sins’, our rebellion against our Creator.

We all know that physical death is made evident by a lifeless body which cannot hear, think or move and by the onset of decay of the flesh which produces a pungent odour in a warm climate. But how is spiritual death made evident? The answer is given in a 3-fold way in Ephesians 2 (v2-3):

Spiritual death is evidenced by “following the course of this world”. That is a life lived in denial of God’s rule. A life of alienation from God. This God-denying lifestyle was very evident to the Ephesians who lived close to one of the ancient ‘seven wonders of the world’ – the temple of Diana. Pagan worship was all around them and many people would buy silver shrines to the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:23-41).

Spiritual death is evidenced by “*following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who is now at work in the sons of disobedience*”. That is a life lived in Satan’s kingdom of darkness & rebellion against God. Spiritual death is evidenced by “*living in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind*’

That is a life lived primarily in pursuit of self-centered passions.

All of these aspects of rebellion against God result in separation from God – which is the essence of spiritual death. Spiritually dead people are not accepted by God, but are under his righteous condemnation. They are truly “*children of wrath*” because God’s just response to human rebellion is His holy anger resulting in the judgement of death. The first three verses of Ephesians 2 present the spiritual reality of the desperately dead condition of all fallen humanity. The truth is that **just as** physically dead people cannot make themselves physically alive, **So likewise** spiritually dead people cannot make themselves spiritually alive.

In contrast to the natural, hopeless, dead state of fallen mankind, Paul writes in verse 4: “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved”.* The word translated ‘saved’ here is in a form which conveys the meaning both that God is doing the saving and that the person saved is completely passive in this action. The word form for ‘saved’ also means that once a person is saved by God they remain irrevocably saved. This mirrors the truth which Jesus expressed when He said: “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day*” {John 6.44}.

It is God **alone** who makes spiritually dead people alive. That’s what Jesus taught Nicodemus when he said:

“*Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God*” {John 3.3}. A spiritually dead person must be supernaturally regenerated by the Spirit of God in order to be alive. This is a gracious work of God flowing from his rich mercy, motivated by His great love. It is God **alone** who acts to save a person. It is God **alone** who makes the foundational decision to give life. A person can then respond by coming to Christ, just as Lazarus physically walked towards the Saviour and left the tomb behind.

The spiritual life which God gives to the spiritually dead is a gift; just as Lazarus was gifted with new physical life which enabled him to hear and respond to the voice of Jesus and to walk out of the tomb. The work of spiritual regeneration in the heart of a spiritually dead person is **by grace alone**. The English word **grace** is derived from the Latin **gratia** meaning “favour”.**Gratia** in turn is derived from **gratus** meaning free. **Grace** is God's unmerited free favour, both for salvation and for ongoing sanctification. Grace is not sold, not rented or leased, it is freely given by God. Grace has helpfully been described as “*everything for nothing to those who don't deserve anything*”. Grace is “what every man, woman and child needs, what none can earn and what God alone can and does freely give”. God, the Giver of life, must act alone to give what is needed for the dead to become alive. It is God’s grace alone which makes people like you and me alive. It is also God’s grace which **unites people** with Christ.

1. **God’s Grace unites us with Christ**

There are three letters in the Greek language (translated into English ‘syn’) which convey the meaning 'together with’ when they are at the front of a word – the idea is of being and/or doing together e.g.the wordsynoagogue.

In the English language we have words derived from Greek which begin with the three letters ‘syn’ e.g.

**Syn**thesis – combining together into a whole

**Syn**ergy – combined action of different parts working together

**Syn**od – an assembly of church office-bearers

The English words in verse 5 “made alive together with” are all one word in Greek – beginning with ‘syn’. Salvation by grace alone means that we have been made alive **together with** Christ. We rightly think of Christ having died bodily on the cross at Calvary. He ‘*breathed his last*’ (Luke 23.46) there. We do not always think so clearly about Christ’s spiritual death. Three hours of unnatural darkness from noon until 3p.m. represented the separation of Jesus from His heavenly Father whilst he hung suspended on a cross between sky and earth. Jesus expressed the agony of His spiritual death when He cried outin Aramaic"*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*"-- which means, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mark 15.34).

Jesus was raised from the dead bodily on the 3rd day after his death. When he appeared to Mary Magdalene, he gave her a message for his disciples “*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*” (John 20:17b). Jesus was restored **not only** to physical life, but also to spiritual life, to the perfect union with His Heavenly Father which he had enjoyed continuously from ‘*before the foundation of the world*’ {John 17.24}.

Christ was restored to life **by his works;** by enduring the cross as a truly innocent man who, although tempted as we are, never sinned, who suffered the full weight of God’s wrath against all the sins of all God’s people.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, WE, who previously were spiritually dead, are made spiritually alive **together with** Christ – **we share** in His victory over sin and death at the cross. We do so not by any merit, not by any worth, but by grace alone! We share, together with Him, in His resurrection, in His ascension, His exaltation, His great honour. We, brothers and sisters in the Lord are united to Christ in a living relationship – like the branches on a vine. Look with me at verses 5&6:

*God…..made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and* ***raised us up with him*** *and* ***seated us with him*** *in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*

Here are **two more** Greek words beginning with ‘syn’ both translated into sets of multiple English words ‘*raised us up with him*’ and ‘*seated us with him****’.*** Now clearly this **does not mean** that all those who have been saved by grace are immediately transported into the very presence of Christ. The One who has Himself ascended and sits at the right hand of God in a position of honour and mediatorial influence as the victorious King of Kings and Lord of Lords who has completed the work He was called to do.

These words are best understood as expressing God’s **future purpose** for His people – a future which is so certain that it can be spoken about as though it had **already** taken place. We see the Apostle Paul use similar language in Rom 8:30: **“***those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified*” {Rom 8:30}. God’s gift of His Holy Spirit **guarantees** that all those saved by grace alone in Christ alone through faith alone **will,** most certainly, be glorified. They **will** be exalted, **will** be raised up together with Christ. They **will** be seated with Him in the honour of His completed work in the New Heavens and New Earth which are yet to be realized in the future.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus: we are **already** united to Christ, we **already** possess the future glories of citizenship in heaven of being able to enter into the very presence of God with acceptance and honor. We **already** have an immeasurably rich inheritance guaranteed.

Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the Ephesians. Much had been taken from him, yet he knew that he possessed riches in Christ that nothing and nobody could separate him from. Our confidence in both the present and future reality of our union with Christ likewise gives us confidence to endure through present distresses, disappointments and difficulties.

God’s grace in uniting us with Christ is a sustaining grace as we *look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith {Heb 12:2}.* God’s grace makes us alive, God’s grace unites us to Christ, and also God’s grace reveals his kindness.

1. **God’s Grace reveals His kindness**

Imagine that there’s a little old lady with a walking stick about to cross a busy road…what would you do? To help her safely pass in front of the traffic, you could exercise **kindness** and escort her courteously across the road, perhaps offering to carry her handbag for her in the process. Kindness delights in the care and happiness of others.

The Greek word in verse 7 which is translated ‘kindness’ has the meaning of providing what is needed to someone in need. It describes an attitude and an action which is helpful and beneficial to somebody else. There is a gentle, compassionate, loving heart to kindness. Think about King David’s treatment of Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9). Scripture records David's question -- "*Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul, that I may show him* ***kindness*** *for Jonathan's sake?"* . David’s desire was to show “the kindness of God” to King Saul’s family because of his covenant with Saul’s son, Jonathan. The young man chosen was Mephibosheth, Jonathan’s son, who "was lame in both feet." He was a cripple; not an honoured member of society in those days.

If David had acted solely according to justice, he would have condemned Mephibosheth who belonged to treacherous Saul’s family. But David acted on the basis of **kindness**, seeking out Mephibosheth, assuring him he had no need to fear, inviting him to live in the king's palace as family and to eat at the king’s table in a position of great honour. Similarly, God’s kindness is His beneficial provision that meets the need of sinful people like you and me who have acted treacherously against Him. God’s kindness is His tender concern, providing for helpless mankind what we never could have provided for ourselves. God is very kind in giving the highest honour to those saved by His grace; He calls them His own children.

It is to the demonstration of this kindness that our text points us in v7: *by grace you have been saved so that – in the coming ages he {God } might* ***show*** *the immeasurable riches of his grace in* ***kindness*** *toward us in Christ Jesus.*

The ‘coming ages’ here most likely refers to all future time. The kindness of God is made known/ demonstrated/shown by the richness of His continuing grace towards His people.

God has been kind to the Reformed Church of Christchurch. Those were part of the church here in 2012 will remember asking the painful question “do we even have a future as a congregation?” The 2011 earthquake had struck, numbers had fallen to such a low level. Past troubles had been many. Now we see the kindness of God. The riches of his provision to us. Have we deserved this? No. Have we earned this? No. The blessings we have experienced together as a church are all a demonstration of the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus

How about you personally?

If you have come to faith, **know** that it is **only** because God has first changed your heart to enable you to believe.

Think of the many blessings which you have received. These are all a demonstration of the immeasurable riches of God’s grace in kindness towards you in Christ Jesus.

It has been said that ‘by grace alone’ {Sola Gratia} means grace at the start, grace to the end, grace in the middle, grace without fail, grace without mixture, grace without addition, grace that allows no boasting, grace that precludes all glorying but in the Lord. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther said, ""*If any man ascribes salvation, even the very least, to the free will of man, he knows nothing of grace, and he has not learnt Jesus Christ aright*." By insisting on grace alone the Reformers were denying that human methods, techniques, or strategies in themselves could ever bring anyone to faith. They never used the language of ‘making a decision for Christ’. They never issued ‘altar calls’ for people to come forward in a worship service a recite a ‘sinners prayer’ and ‘get themselves saved’.

However Jesus did use a form of the word translated ‘kindness’ in His invitation to*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30)*

Jesus' yoke is kind. It is helpful, beneficial and good for us. His yoke guides people like you and me, just as a younger, weaker ox ploughing a field might be led by an older, stronger one to whom the first is yoked.

Jesus **does not** issue an ‘altar call’. However, He **does not** extend an invitation to you to “make a decision for Jesus”. He says “come” – just as he once said to Lazarus “come out”. However, here is the truth: you can only come to Jesus if you have first been saved by **grace alone.** This is not of your own doing – it is the gift of God. Brothers and sisters in the Lord, thank God for his gift of grace which makes us alive, unites us to Christ and shows the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindnesstowards us in Christ Jesus.

AMEN