

REFORMATION500 SERMON SERIES

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Reformation500 GRACE ALONE

Ephesians 2: 1-10

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I have been rather taken aback by the number of hurricanes in the Caribbean area of recent. With each storm there is massive flooding as well, creating raging torrents. No one in their right mind would go into those turbulent waters. Unless you are a mother wanting to save a toddler, who has been swept away. A mother's love for her child would compel her to dive into that water. It is interesting that the apostle Paul, when speaking of sharing the gospel, says "the love of Christ compels us..." Love is a very powerful motivator. That explains why God is so determined to save people. The Bible says, "God is love". So, God's own character 'compelled' him to save us, even though the cost to his Son Jesus was horrendous. This month we are focusing on Reformation 500. We are looking at the key themes and characters of the Reformation. Today we will consider what is meant by 'grace alone', which John Calvin was strong in emphasising.

The emphasis in the teaching of John Calvin, and the other Reformers was on the word 'alone'. We are saved by 'grace alone'. It would be unfair to say the Catholic church taught we are saved by our good works. The issue was the 'and' in their approach. It was about faith and works, grace and our merit in responding to God. The Reformers said no, we are saved by the grace of God, his unmerited favour, alone. That meant that nothing we do commends us before God. Nor is it about us cooperating with God to merit him saving us. Salvation, from beginning to end, is the gracious gift of God to the undeserving. The Greek word for 'grace', 'charis' means 'gift'. So, being right with God is a gift of his love. We are forgiven, not because of what we do, but simply as an act of grace from God. The reality is there was no other way.

That is clear when we look at Ephesians 2, and note honestly the human condition. Note 1: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins..." The two Greek words here mean 'deliberately crossing a boundary, or trespassing' and 'missing the mark, or falling short' of what's required. If you like: the sin of commission and omission. Deliberately doing wrong, failing to do right. You could say before God we are both rebels and failures who are spiritually 'dead'.

Now this is not just an occasional wrong doing, it's our lifestyle; as Paul goes on: "...in which you used to live." This lifestyle is not one of freedom. That is 'I live life my way, rebel and be free!' It's one of slavery. Paul says there are three things that enslave us in our sinful lifestyle. He speaks of: "...the ways of the world...our sinful nature... the devil." The 'world' refers to the fact we fail God together as a society. Isaiah says, "We all like sheep have gone astray." Sheep just follow each other. People tend not to think for themselves but to go along with 'what's in'. So, the culture of the world can dominate us and hold us captive. We sin in the same way as the others around us.

Not only is there this outward force that enslaves us. There is also one within. Paul speaks in verse 3 of "...gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts..." So, our own natures hold us in slavery to sin. One theologian has referred to sin as an addiction and any one who is honest will admit that we are our own worst enemies. We ourselves cause our worst screw ups, continually, by our own addicted behaviour. Martin Luther confessed 'I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope- Self'.

Behind the outward and inner influences is a further influence on our sinning. Paul refers to it as, "...the ruler of the kingdom of the air". Behind the evil in this world is the devil, the father of lies, who pushes and prods and tempts us to rebel against our maker. So spiritually, psychologically, socially, environmentally our human condition, despite the good things, is sick. Paul says in verse 3: "...we are by nature objects of wrath". We deserve nothing less than to feel the full force of God's anger. We are so far gone, we are spiritually '...dead in our transgressions'... So here we see why our being saved can only be by God's 'grace alone'. We are spiritually dead. Can some one who is dead help themselves? Without God taking the initiative, we have absolutely no hope at all. We deserve nothing. We can do nothing to make things right. But God comes along and gives us all we need. It's an act of pure grace.

Look at verse 4 "But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions- it is by grace you have been saved." What has God done? "By grace you have been saved". Notice how God did it. Verse 5 "God ...made us alive with Christ." Verse 6: "And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus". The three verbs 'made alive' 'raised' and 'made to sit' refer to the historical events in the saving work of Jesus. We usually refer to these events as the resurrection, the ascension and the session. What is amazing in our text is that Paul is not writing about Jesus but about us. He is saying we who have faith, are 'in Christ'. We are united with Jesus in such a way that

whatever happened to Jesus happened to us. Like money in the wallet. Where the wallet goes so the money goes. Being 'in Christ' we have been made spiritually alive. We have been raised to heaven and now we sit at God's right hand. In thinking what it means to be Christian it's not just going to church and knowing about the Bible. What is fundamental in being a Christian is our relationship with Jesus. Jesus is not just a dead hero. He is the living Lord. With his Spirit residing in us we are united with Jesus. Instead of being 'dead in sin' and slaves to sin, Jesus has given us a new life and a new victory. We are so intimately related to Jesus that we already sit with him in heaven in God's place of honour!

Why has God done all this for us? Was it because we were so good? Was there something good in us, some supposed merit? No. It was nothing in us, but what is in God. Paul gives us four words to express what motivated God. Verse 4a "God who is rich in mercy..."; 4b "...out of the great love with which he loved us..."; verse 5 & 8 "...by grace you have been saved..."; verse 7 "...his kindness to us in Christ Jesus." Why did God act? Out of his sheer mercy, love, grace and kindness! More than that, he saved us in order that (7) "...that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace in Christ Jesus." What is astonishing here is the magnitude of the love of God. Look at the language Paul uses (4) "...rich in mercy...great love". Back in chapter 1:8 Paul writes "...we have forgiveness...according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us." It is a grace says Paul that is "...incomparable". It is love, a graciousness, a generosity that knows no bounds. Nothing, ever, can compare with it. A parent's deep love for their child only gives us a hint of the wonder of God's love.

Now if salvation is only because of God's grace and nothing we do, then anyone can be a child of God. It doesn't matter who they are, or their background, how good or bad. Because as verse 8 says "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this not from yourselves it is a gift of God so that no one can boast". It is not a matter of being good enough. No one can boast that they are better than others and therefore that's why God saved them. You and I are no better than anyone else. We might think occasionally, as decent middle-class people, that we are better than the drunks and the drug addicts, the wife basher or child abuser. But before God we are not. What we are in Jesus is only because of God's mercy and love. So, at Hope in the Hills let's strive to offer the hope of the gospel to anyone and everyone irrespective of their circumstances or lifestyle. Our outreach to others should not depend on what they can offer us. We strive to graciously, unconditionally, bring God's hope and joy into their lives. Just like God did for us. As Hope in the Hills let's strive to imitate our loving father. Let's strive to be loving, gracious, gentle, generous to reveal something of the wonder of God's character. The 'love of Christ compels' us to do so.

'Grace alone' also means we can look at ourselves differently. It means we look at ourselves as God does. God loves us so deeply, so overwhelmingly, he gave everything in Jesus to have us as his children. How does that make you feel? When you feel a failure, a nobody, not good enough, remember God loves you unconditionally. If we focus on the amazing grace of God we can be gracious on ourselves. We can have the courage to look at our sinful habits and deal with them because in Christ they are forgiven. We also have the emotional space to think of those who have wronged us. Grace makes us realise those persons also are sinful and broken. And as our Father is gracious so we too can forgive and let go.

'Grace alone' means we can be those who love to give as God gave. Grace means being generous, being open to give hope to others. There is something very special about being able to give something to others that provides relief and joy. Wouldn't you just love to be able to give like that? Well we can, as we share the gospel of what God has done in Jesus. It's all by grace alone.