

Session 2: Grace Alone & Christ Alone

New City Church Retreat
September 23, 2017 (evening)

“For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:22-25)

1. Introduction

Good evening. In this session we are going to continue our meditation on the Solas of the Reformation with ‘grace alone’ and ‘Christ alone.’ Like last time we will have a brief historical sketch, this time focusing on the development of some of Luther’s key ideas. After that we will stick close to Scripture as we cover, in turn, the concepts ‘grace alone’ and ‘Christ alone.’ Again, we’ll finish up with reflection and prayer.

2. Reformation Part 1: Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Gospel of Grace

(a) *Luther’s Obsession with God’s Holiness*

Martin Luther was the son of a peasant.¹ Luther’s parents were severe and his schoolmasters were no different. It is inevitable that these experiences would influence Martin’s view of God so that he thought God harsh. Luther understood that unlike us, God is perfectly holy and just, and because of this justice God must judge sinners. But Luther found that he could not love a God like that; he could only find hatred in his heart.

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that if this one man had not been obsessed with the holiness of God that the course of history would have been much different. Even as a monk in a world that considered the monastic life to be the peak of spirituality, Luther found that no matter how hard he worked he could not reach a satisfactory level of holiness. Luther is said to have spent long hours in the confessional confessing his sins, but even this Catholic sacrament did not allay his sense of unworthiness. Rather, in doing his best to confess every single sin, Luther only found that he could not – his sinfulness was simply too deep.

Martin Luther had a full understanding of what John Calvin would call ‘double knowledge:’ that is, knowledge of God and knowledge of self. The more you know who God is, the better you know yourself, and the better you know yourself, the more you understand who God is. In the mirror Martin saw his sinfulness and it put the fear of God in him because he understood how perfectly holy God must be.

1. Justo L. González, *The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2 of *The Story of Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Prince Press, 2009), 15.

Eventually Luther's confessor and superior decided that it might help Luther to continue his studies in preparation for teaching Scripture at the new University of Wittenberg² founded by Frederik III of Saxony. It was through this teaching post, probably when lecturing on the Letter to the Romans in 1515, that Luther made the discovery that not only satisfied his weary soul, but which would grow into the Reformation understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is said to have begun with Romans 1:17. I read it here with verse 16 for context: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith"" (Romans 1:16–17 ESV).

The word 'gospel' is a word that means literally 'good news.' The Greek word δικαιοσύνη translated 'righteousness' by the ESV also means 'justice.' How could it be good news that God is just? If God is just, then He must judge sinners – that is, all of us – according to what they deserve.

Let me quote Justo González at length about Luther's solution:³

Luther came to the conclusion that the 'justice of God' does not refer, as he had been taught, to the punishment of sinners. It means rather that the 'justice' or 'righteousness' of the righteous is not their own, but God's. The 'righteousness of God' is that which is given to those who live by faith. It is given, not because they are righteous, nor because they fulfill the demands of divine justice, but simply because God wishes to give it. Thus, Luther's doctrine of 'justification by faith' does not mean that what God demands of us is faith, as if this were something we have to do or achieve, and which God then rewards. It means rather that both faith and justification are a work of God, a free gift to sinners. As a result of this discovery, Luther tells us, "I felt that I had been born anew and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase 'the justice of God' no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love."

Love and grace. These were the discoveries that refreshed Luther's spirit, not necessarily discovered directly in Romans 1:17, but supported by the full witness of the Bible and giving new meaning to Romans 1:17. Let's consider briefly a few passages:

Text 1: "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear

2. Ibid., 17-18.

3. Ibid., 19.

has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:15–19 ESV)

Text 2: “And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.” (Revelation 21:5–6 ESV)

Text 3: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:8–11 ESV)

So, in order of the texts:

- 1) We love because God first loved us;
- 2) To those who are thirsty and humble God is gracious and gives the water of life for free; and
- 3) the believer does not boast in his or her own righteousness, but in the only perfect righteousness, the righteousness of God that comes to us through faith in Jesus.

(b) The Offense of Indulgences

So then, knowing all of this about the economy of God – where justification and eternal life are free! – Luther simply could not tolerate what was going on in the medieval church. How could they dare to pretend to sell for money what God has given absolutely free of charge?!

And it wasn’t only about indulgences for Luther. We have seen how the pope signed off on the sale of official pardons, which of course, as Luther points out in his 95 theses, the pope has no power or authority to do anyway. For Luther and the other Reformers that rose up in his wake, the entire sacramental system of the Catholic church was problematic because church authorities pretended to be able to mediate between people and God.

But, say the Reformers, sticking to the Bible and not traditional church teachings, Jesus Christ is all the mediation we need. All true Christians have direct access to God thanks to Jesus. Just read Hebrews 10:19-22: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

What is more, all true Christians are now priests to the world. Peter puts it this way: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9 ESV)

Therefore, over time, what began with the doctrine of justification by faith became a thoroughgoing reformation of theology, worship, and daily living. Free salvation was put into the hands of thirsty people, but so too the responsibilities that come with being children in the household of God.

(c) Luther Undergoes Excommunication so that he “may gain Christ” (cf. Phil. 3:8)

The emerging movement that we call now the Reformation started out with the theological conviction that the true Church of God is one and cannot be divided. For that reason reformers were called Protestants. They hoped through protest and debate to win over the authorities of the Catholic church, thereby reforming it from the inside.

This, however, was not to be. Luther and others were disappointed to find that no amount of debate and reasoning from Scripture would change the church hierarchs. Since church leaders accepted other sources of authority, like councils and papal decrees, Catholic theologians saw no reason to be bound strictly by Scripture. Eventually it became clear that the Protestants would not quickly return to the communion of the Catholic church, but rather Protestantism as a movement would grow and establish itself permanently with its counterclaim to represent the one true Church.

It is much too complex to go into here, but there is no doubt that important players at all levels of the political and ecclesiastical realm – for church power and state power were indivisible at this time – could never budge because their loyalty was to their own ambition.

We can be thankful that Luther and others stood boldly in the face of danger and worldly dishonour. The pope and the emperor had the worldly power to kill Luther and make his life miserable, but Luther did not bow to them. He trusted God more than he feared men (cf. Prov 29:25). He was willing to burn his own letter of excommunication because the pope’s worldly punishments and rewards cannot compare with those of God Almighty. He was prepared to “count everything as loss” so that he might “gain Christ” (cf. Phil 3:8).

May we be so courageous and single minded. If we stand for the truth like Luther did, then God gets all the glory.

3. A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

I think this is a good time to sing that classic hymn together, A Mighty Fortress is Our God. It gives us a break between sections, but it also fits really well at this juncture. We’ve just talked about the stand that Luther took. Now, let’s sing the song Luther wrote himself that extols the God who gave Luther strength to stand in the face of all hardship.

4. Grace Alone

We have heard and sung about the might of God, the strength with which Luther was able to be courageous. Throughout we have also hinted at the mercy of God. If we are saved freely, then it is because God desired to save us.

God made this world and so God loves this world. John 3:16 reads, “For God so loved the world, that he gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

The love which God has and the mercy with which he forgives us is, thankfully, part of God’s very nature. You may remember that when Moses asked God to show him His glory, God proclaimed His name this way in Exodus 34:5-7: “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.””

Mercy, grace, and patience are at the very heart of God. Praise be to God. Amen.

(a) Our justification and salvation is by grace alone

God always takes the first step toward us. We are born in a sinful state from which we cannot reach out to God. Therefore God has reached out to us to reveal Himself in the history of Israel which has been written down as our Scripture. God reached out to us in Jesus and dwelt among us, even putting His hands on those who by the law were unclean.

Grace is that which is given to those who don’t deserve it. It is by such grace that we are both justified and promised eternal life.

Text 4: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:6–11 ESV)

Text 5: “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.” (Titus 3:3–8 ESV)

(b) Our faith is possible through grace alone

Some of us have already trusted in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. My prayer for you and for me is that our soaking in Scripture this weekend will renew, strengthen, and perfect our faith.

Some of us may not yet believe in Jesus with the rich kind of faith we talked about yesterday. I want you to know that faith is a gift. Ask God for it. I promise you that God desires your trust more than you desire it yourself.

Text 6: “And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:9–13 ESV)

If nothing else, the Old Testament account of Israel’s centuries-long relationship with God proves that human beings are faithless by nature. That is why God promises through Ezekiel during the darkest hours of Israel’s history: “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26 ESV).

God does by grace what we simply cannot do on our own. He opens the eyes and ears of our inmost self to believe and trust Him.

Text 7: “So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’” Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. 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 6:41–44 ESV)

Text 8: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men... Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 1:22–25; 2:12–16 ESV)

(c) Our sanctification is worked by grace alone

Tomorrow I will encourage you to pursue your own growth in grace and to do all sorts of good things for the glory of God. But make no mistake, even if the Christian life does take effort on our part, our growth in holiness – that is, sanctification – is impossible apart from God’s grace. It is God’s Holy Spirit in the believer that enables a person to both please God and to grow in maturity and holiness with the right mindset. The Christian gives thanks and glory to God for every good thing produced in his or her life.

Text 9: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” (Philippians 1:3–11 ESV)

Text 10: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 ESV)

5. Christ Alone

The formula of salvation that we have seen states that our faith must be ‘in Christ alone.’ But who is Christ? Christ is a title given to Jesus of Nazareth, the man born of the virgin Mary and conceived in her by the Holy Spirit. The word Christ is a Greek word *χριστος* meaning ‘anointed.’ It is the direct translation of the Hebrew word *מָשִׁיחַ* which we know in English as Messiah.

If you know the books of Samuel, then you will understand the meaning of the title Christ. Recall that the prophet Samuel was sent to anoint the king of Israel with oil as a sign that God has chosen that man to be king. First Samuel anointed Saul, who became king, but then lost God’s favour by disobedience. Then Samuel was sent to anoint David who became the symbolic representation of the perfect king in Israel.

So, the title Christ given to Jesus over and over again in the New Testament signifies that Jesus is the one chosen by God. Because Jesus is adopted by Joseph, the husband of Mary and a descendant of David, Jesus is also legal heir to the Davidic kingship and so fulfills promises given through the prophets, like this one from Ezek 37:24: “My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes.”

The ‘anointing’ or public choosing of Jesus happened the day he was baptized in the Jordan river by John the Baptist. Matthew 3:13-17 recounts as follows: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.””

(a) Jesus Christ is the only path to God

Despite what the culture says, there is only one path to God and eternal life. It is not true that all religions share the same essential pieces that all lead to the same place. The Christian faith is revealed to us by God on the pages of holy Scripture. The religions of the world are made up by humans.

Text 11: ““Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?” (John 14:1–9 ESV)

(b) Only Jesus, the Son of God is able to offer a sufficient sacrifice for our justification

In the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy the teaching of God includes an elaborate system of sacrifices to restore relationship between our holy God and the sinful community. But these sacrifices were limited in their efficacy. The ritual of sacrifice was much more effective in providing a picture of what is necessary for forgiveness of sins than in actually forgiving them. Why? It is because forgiveness requires the sacrifice of life; not just the life of bulls, and sheep, and goats, but the life of a perfect, blameless human being who can take our deserved judgement from us and return to us His own innocence and righteousness.

The Old Testament law specifies that both the offering and the priest must be without physical blemishes. Jesus Christ is both high priest and atoning sacrifice. Because Jesus must and does indeed fulfill the reality of forgiveness and not just the image of it, His perfection is not just physical, but it is also moral. By virtue of Jesus’ perfect obedience to God the Father, Jesus, the Son of God, is righteous and blameless, and worthy to substitute His life for ours.

Text 12: “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Hebrews 9:22 ESV)

Text 13: ““If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” (Leviticus 17:10–11 ESV)

Text 14:⁴ “You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep in which is a blemish, any defect whatever, for that is an abomination to the LORD your God.” (Deuteronomy 17:1 ESV)

Text 15: “And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron, saying, None of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or an injured hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles. No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the LORD’s food offerings; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not go through the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.”” (Leviticus 21:16–23 ESV)

Text 16: “They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:25–29 ESV)

Text 17: “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14–16 ESV)

(c) We must boast in nothing except in Jesus Christ alone

Humility is essential for the Christian. As we saw yesterday, true faith is inseparable from a humble disposition. Since we know that we were doomed until Jesus bought us with His own precious life, we also know that we cannot boast in our own accomplishments. We cannot bring any of our own merits before the throne of God to plead innocence with: not that time you gave money to a homeless person; not those months you spent taking

4. Originally Leviticus 22:17-25.

care of your sick relative; not the years you spent serving the people of God brewing coffee, reading Scripture, or pastoring the flock; not all the jobs you created by running a successful business – nothing. Only Jesus Christ.

We must hold onto the name of Jesus and let it be forever on our lips. Jesus is our righteousness. Jesus is our salvation. Jesus is our security in the face of danger, slander, injustice, and persecution. **That** is faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Text 18: “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” (Romans 3:27–30 ESV)

Text 19: “Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”” (Jeremiah 9:23–24 ESV)

Text 20: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”” (1 Corinthians 1:27–31 ESV)

Text 21: “For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:13–14 ESV)

6. Conclusion: Pray in Groups

Consider what God is saying to you right now. Share it with two to three other people and pray for each other. Pray for people you know. Pray for the New City Church and pray for the Church universal. God has done so much already and will yet do much more. Praise God. Amen.