

Sola Gratia – Living by Grace Alone
Deuteronomy 9:1-6, Ephesians 2:1-13,

Friends, I'm sure that you've heard the phrase *"the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."*

And perhaps that phrase has come to mind when you've met someone's father or mother and you can see a striking resemblance in looks, or you notice a similarity in personality – you might think to yourself *"Wow! The apple doesn't fall far from the tree – they are a chip off the old block – like father like son..."*

And depending on their looks and their character that could be a good thing or it could be a bad thing... (show the Mullet family)

The fact is friends that for better or for worse parents pass on certain things to their kids, and it's no different when it comes to the family of God.

You see when we are obedient to Christ's command to "Go and make disciples of all nations" and we start discipling people - we will inevitably pass certain things on to them as part of the discipleship process, and depending on what we pass on that can be a good thing or it could be a bad thing.

So, since our calling at Valleyview is to make disciples of the nations which Christ is leading to live in our surrounding community – we need to make sure that what we are passing on to them is a good thing.

Because once they are discipled – they will make disciples, and they will pass on what we've taught them which is good... if what we've passed on is correct and true, but it's very dangerous if what we've passed on is not correct.

We don't want to be guilty of misrepresenting God's good news, or twisting it into a burden like the Pharisees had done with the Mosaic Covenant. In fact they are a great example of how the apple doesn't fall far from the tree in a bad way when it came to making disciples – and Jesus noted that.

In Matt 23:15 he says *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”*

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

But note that Jesus isn't condemning their effort and their zeal to make disciples - he's condemning who they have become and thus what they are reproducing.

You see the Pharisees had forgotten their roots, their history, the story of how they had come to be the people of God living in the Promised Land.

They had forgotten what God had said to Israel in Deuteronomy 9:6 *“it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people.”*

The Pharisees had gotten it this flipped around. They figured that if they were able to be righteous, if they could make sure they didn't break any of the Mosaic Laws, then their obedience would help them regain their Promised Land.

They failed to remember that the Promised Land was a gift to start with – an act of Grace, not something their ancestors – or they had ever or could ever earn.

Now lest we think that we, as Christians, would never be so foolish as those Pharisees we ought to remember our own history.

Back in the 1500's it was becoming evident that Church in the West – the Medieval Catholic Church was misrepresenting God's good news, obscuring Jesus Christ and producing “disciples” who believed they had to rely on performing religious works in order to be assured of their forgiveness. At that time the church leaders were doing nothing about the fact that scriptures were not available for people to read, if

they could read, let alone have the scriptures read in the church in the language of the people.

The scriptures and the church liturgy were read and performed in Latin – if you didn't understand too bad!

And many of the priests didn't understand Latin or read it terrible well either, they just mumbled their way through the Lord's Supper liturgy as best they could.

In fact, many believe that the origin of the magic phrase "Hocus Pocus" comes from the Priests mumbling the Latin phrase "Hoc est Corpus" which means "This is my Body."

And after saying this the priest would wave his hands over the bread so that, according to R.C. teaching about the Lord's Supper - it would become the actual Body and Blood of Christ.

So the mumbled words "*Hocus Pocus*" become a superstitious phrase with magic power that can change things from one thing into another – as opposed to understanding and

believing that it's the Holy Spirit who makes the bread and the cup become the spiritual body and blood of Christ for us.

So – lest we think Christians have done it better - we should remember our own Church history.

But Christ is gracious – and just as He came to fulfill the old Covenant in a new way and undo the damage which the Pharisees had done – in the 1500's our Lord raised up leaders in His Church to reform it, to clear away all the extra clutter and baggage and superstition which had accumulated and to make Himself the focus once again.

And so we all cheer and say hooray...

and we assure ourselves that we would never be so foolish at those Medieval Catholic Christians who turned church into religion and passed on ignorance and superstition instead of faith - we're smarter than that.

And so with this as our Protestant history you may have heard some of the five Sola's which describe the work of the Reformation and have since become foundational – or are supposed to be foundation for our own Church background.

The five Sola's are; 1) Sola Gratia; grace alone, 2) Sola Scripture; scripture alone, 3) Sola Fide; faith alone, 4) Solus Christus; Christ alone, and 5) Soli Deo Gloria

But friends – I think that if we examine what these terms really meant and examine our own faith with them we might indeed discover that we have wandered away from what the Reformers started and we have developed our own traditions, superstitions and ignorance just as the Medieval Catholic Church had.

And if we are going to go and make disciples – then we want to make sure we correct that before we go and accidentally pass our on misunderstandings to someone else – before we go and accidentally pass that on to our youth and our kids – because the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

So, we've already started doing this with Sola Gratia – by Grace alone; and in the critique of the Pharisees, and the Medieval Catholic Church this morning we've noted how they had forgotten God's Grace, and had taught that human effort was a pre-requisite for receiving God's blessing and salvation.

So the questions for us this morning are; have we forgotten what Grace is, and in our discipling of others are we communicating in some way shape or form that our human efforts are a pre-requisite for receiving God's blessings and salvation?

Do we truly know what it means to live by grace alone?

Do we live and disciple by Grace alone... and thus produce disciples who also live by Grace alone?

Before we answer that friends, let's turn our attention to our second scripture passage this morning, Ephesians 2 and listen to what the Holy Spirit wants to say to us about living and discipling by Grace alone.

And you may have noticed that a couple of verses stand out because Paul repeats them.

So first and most applicable to living by grace alone is when he writes in vs. 5 and 8 *“for it is by grace you have been saved.”*

That’s pretty straight forward friends – the prerequisite for our salvation is not our effort or work, but God’s grace.

And while most of us would say we know that – if you listen carefully to our language when we speak about coming to faith in Christ - we’ll often say things like *“it’s easy to do”* or *“just pray the sinners prayer”* or my favorite *“God’s giving you a free gift – all you have to do... is reach out and take it!”*

And just like that we’ve crossed that fine line from living by Grace alone into advocating for some sort of pre-requisite work on our part.

But Paul clearly says here in Ephesians 2:9 that our salvation is *“not by works.”*

Now we might be tempted to say that human beings must get some credit at least for believing? For having faith, right?

But Paul explains that not even our belief, our faith can function as a prerequisite – even those are a gift from God – they are by grace. *“This is not from yourselves”* (vs.8)

Why? Well that’s easy, Paul explains *“so that no one can boast.”* (vs.9)

You see friends, when you live by Grace alone your Christian life is free from pride – I don’t mean that you will never struggle with pride – but the basis on which you call yourself and have become a follower of Jesus is not based on your accomplishments and so will not give off any sort of arrogance, or contempt or condescension when you are discipling others.

On the contrary - If we believe that we’ve done something to make our salvation possible – even if it is as subtle as “having faith” then eventually we’ll start to believe that if we can do

it... others should be able to do it to. So we begin to pressure them, do it! Have faith! Just believe!

And if they do – they are trusting in their own efforts, not in Christ's work.

And when they can't – then we're wide open for the devil to come in and stroke our ego and deceive us into believing that we're better than others... because we were capable of responding to God in such a way when others aren't – and pride takes us down.

And in today's post-modern society nothing kills the discipling opportunities faster than a whiff of arrogance.

If we want to succeed in our mission - we can't afford any hint of pride.

Otherwise we end up coming across like we have it all figured out and if others would just be more like us – they could have it all together to – and that just turns people away, and Lord

help when we pass this on and someone actually believes this, we've created a monster!

Additionally if we are not living by Grace alone we can start to depend on a certain methodology for making disciples, right?

If there's something we can do then if we can just get people to feel inspired, if we can just connect with them emotionally, if we can just lay out all the facts for them, give the proof and so on – then they will be able to come to a place where they can make a decision for Christ and accept his free gift!

And so our discipleship becomes one-sidedly focused on doing only that. It's lop-sided, unbalanced, and eventually all we're producing is inspired people, emotional people, or intellectual people – but not disciples...

The good news friends, is the truth protects us from this – the truth is *“for it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God!”*
Amen?

And friends God's Grace is necessary because, as Paul writes twice, "*we were dead in our transgressions.*" (vs1,5)

Now how are we to understand what it means to be "dead in our transgressions?"

It certainly doesn't mean that unsaved human beings are all raving mad psychopaths who are incapable of any moral or civic good.

There are some very good "dead" people out there – the Dali Lama for instance, is a wonderfully moral man.

But he very much believes in salvation by our works. He has said "*The problems facing the world may seem overwhelming, but, basically, these problems are temporary.*" *Other than natural catastrophes, most are "manmade; our own creation. So, logically, we also have the ability to work on these problems."* Interview with Ann Curry, TODAY News, 5/20/10

Friends what the Dali Lama and many other good people don't understand is that being "*dead in our transgressions*" means all the typical immoral acts and vices which we commit that we typically call "sins" – drunkenness, smoking, lusting, pride, manmade problems and so on... are not actually Sin.

These transgressions are symptoms which point to a much deeper condition, an orientation of our nature - that we can call "Capital S sin" or "Original Sin" and this reality affects the totality of who we are, so that everything we do – whether morally good or depraved, is done in to hide from, or in opposition to God.

That is what it means to be "*dead in our transgressions*" and I hope you can see how that necessitates God having to take the initiative to step in, to break in to our lives and pursue us with his Grace.

I hope you can see how there can be no possible pre-requisite on our part in order to be saved. Sin – not "our sins" - our underlying orientation makes it impossible.

So why is it so important that we get this theological point... what difference does it make to our day to day lives?!

Because so many of us have yet to come to terms with our Original Sin and face it.

To be honest, most of us would rather not even talk about our “sins” let alone contemplate that they might be symptomatic of something that fundamentally shapes and controls us we have no choice over.

If we have to deal with – we only stay on the surface.

We’d rather sporadically deal with whatever “sins” make us feel guilty, confess them to Jesus be relieved of the guilty feelings, and then from there our goal is to try and do better next time.

We try to get those bad habits and character flaws under control, because if we can - then perhaps that there isn’t something fundamentally wrong with us after all.

So we work at living like a Christian, showing others how accepting the free gift of salvation has made a difference in our lives because now we can keep our “sins” under control, and wouldn’t others want to be like this too?

Yep – it’s all us isn’t it... It’s all our work.

We come to Jesus, we confess, we feel better, we try to do better, we struggle to keep up appearances, we try to assure ourselves we’re ok...

And many non-Christians appreciate that because our good lives and actions restore their faith in humanity. If we can do it – there’s hope for them too.

Now, call me crazy but that doesn’t have the feel of Living by Grace alone does it?

Yet this is what I see so many people struggle to do when they are trying to follow Jesus.

And this is what so many people think it means to become and make disciples of Jesus.

Friends hear the good news that Paul writes to us *“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy MADE US ALIVE with Christ – even when we were dead...”*

The truth of the Grace of the gospel is that Christ comes to us when we are at our worst – not when we are at our best.

Friends let that sink in... God loved you when you were at your worst; Christ gives you salvation when you were at your worst.

Who are you when you are at your worst? Friends that is when Christ is closest to you! As Romans 5:20 says *“But where sin increased, grace increased all the more”*

Friends the Holy Spirit is leading Valleyview to be the kind of Church that lives and ministers and makes disciples by Grace Alone.

And that means that we are becoming a church which loves others when they are at their worst – not just when they are at their best.

We want to be a church – and this will sound crazy – where people can be at their worst.

Why? – well in part because way too many people think they have to have it all together before they feel comfortable being around the church and being a part of the church.

Somehow they’ve picked up the vibe that church is where the good people go to show off how well they’ve got it all together. Friends, there’s no other way to say this - That’s a load of B.S.

To combat that – by God’s Grace – we will become a church where there is no shame in confessing our sins and our SIN

No shame in admitting things like; I have an anger problem and it makes me want to hit my wife.

I am emotionally empty and I ignore my family and I try to fill my emptiness by shopping and buying lots of shoes and clothes and I've racked up crazy debt because of it.

I am addicted to alcohol or pornography. I have an eating disorder, I cut myself, I am gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

I gossip about others because it makes me feel better about myself, or when I get hurt, I don't care what it takes I will get even with you.

Whoever you are when you are at your worst...

Friends by God's Grace we are becoming that place, that community where people can encounter Christ when they are dead in their transgressions.

Because simply put – when Christ meets us at our worst that is when he makes us come alive.

When we come to know that Christ has witnessed our most despicable moments and yet He loves us anyways...

When we experience our Christian community has witnessing our brokenness, our sinfulness and they still stick with us...

Then love comes to life in us, gratitude springs forth in us, we want to obey Christ and transformation by the Holy Spirit has begun.

But let us not make this into a pre-requisite either... we can't force this to happen – it is occurring among us and becoming a reality because of God's Grace - because we are God's handiwork and this one of those good works He has prepared in advance for us to do.

Friends It's all God, not us – lest we should boast – Sola Gratia, Soli Deo Gloria

By Grace Alone, to God be the Glory alone – and all God's people said – AMEN!