

**"CALVIN: HIS UNDERSTANDING OF
GRACE, CHRIST AND FAITH ALONE"**

Romans 3:21-28

William MacDonald writes in his book, *The Grace of God*, "To seek to earn, merit, or purchase salvation is to insult the Giver [in other words, God]. Imagine you are invited to a banquet in the White House by the President of the United States. [Remember I said invited not being party crashers like that couple that made the headlines last year]. You are seated at a table that is filled with the choicest foods. Every effort is made to give you a most enjoyable evening. At the end of a lovely visit, the president stands at the front door and says goodbye. What do you do? As you leave, do you press a dime into his hand and say, "Thanks for your kindness. I have enjoyed the evening very much. I realize it has cost you a lot of money, and I want to help you pay for the meal?" Is that the proper response to his kindness? No, it is a rude and insulting gesture. So it would be with God's grace."

Well today we are going to focus on how that great reformer, John Calvin looked at the grace of God. And like his reformer-friend, Martin Luther, who taught that we are "justified by grace alone through faith," we are going to look at not only grace alone, but Christ alone and faith alone and how Calvin approached all three. There were really four Reformation mottos, the three I just mentioned and there was a fourth- Scripture alone. So let us look at these three today and see what Calvin believed.

First, **Grace Alone.** Calvin was right behind Luther in understanding that divine grace was the answer to what both gentlemen thought was life's most important question and it was for them, "*How can a sinful human being come into the presence of a holy God?*" Now this very question might seem strange to some of us living today in the 21st century. I mean, there is not too much in today's culture that suggests, that even encourages us to live holy lives, is there? Think about it- when was the last time you watched a movie, TV program or heard an advertisement that had the word "holy" or

“holiness” in the title? And yet maybe we can get a handle on this topic if we look at the **notion of success**. Now success is something that our society today can track with, right? I mean, people everywhere want to be successful, don’t they? Don’t you? Well, success was important for the medieval church at the time of Calvin for it preached that salvation came about because a person was spiritually successful and doing one’s best. There was even a medieval idea of “doing one’s best” that was summed up in a Latin phrase that meant “to do that which is in you.” For if you did your moral best, the grace of God would move in and do the rest.

But let’s stop right here and answer some questions like what is our best? How do I know if I am doing my best? And what if I am having a downer day and have spiritually tanked and my spiritual best, my moral best, well....?

And so we might revert to a “works righteousness” mentality and say that God is somewhere, out there with his spiritual and moral check-list marking us off and we find ourselves living for spiritual brownie points and rewards.

So what happened back in the 16th century is Martin Luther was reading his good old Bible one day and he read the Psalms and the book of Romans and he has a “breakthrough.” And so **instead of worrying over**

his own righteousness, Luther came upon a new kind of

righteousness- the righteousness of God. And our righteousness and

God’s righteousness is on two different planes for God is to be trusted, God is always fulfilling his promises, and God is faithful even when we are not.

Folks, if our salvation is based upon our own faithfulness of our efforts of being righteous, we are doomed. You and I cannot do enough “good works” to earn our salvation. And so our hope is tied to a God who is faithful and who lives up to His word.

The whole notion that God is true to His promises was huge and a key element of grace for both Luther and Calvin. And the wonderful, gracious promise of salvation in Jesus Christ is at the very heart of the Christian life. But it is up to us to accept this promise and believe it.

So for Calvin "grace alone" came to mean that it is through grace that any one of us are saved and it is God who bestows grace not based on our good deeds or our merit. And the very grace of God is really a definition of who God truly is, a God who sent His only Son out of His love for us; a God who is for us. Grace alone.

Second, **Christ alone.** Now the God that we worship is not only for us, which is great, but He took it one step further. Think of it this way- I am all for our medical missionary to Turkey- Dr. John Fowler. I've met with him and his family here in Akron when they were back in the States. Why, I can even send money for his mission work and I can write him e mails, telling him I am all for him and his work but that really falls short.

I mean if I wanted to take it to the fullest extent, if I really wanted to take it to the limit I would go over and be with him and do what I could to help him and be with him in his ministry. That is going the full extent, isn't it? Many times what people might need is others to be "with them" in whatever and wherever they find themselves. Dr. Fowler might need me to be "with him," in **solidarity** with him. That is what God did in Jesus Christ- God became flesh, He became one like us. And that is what it says in John 1:14, "And the Word [Jesus Christ] became flesh and dwelt among us." That is what is so miraculous and wonderful and mysterious and life-given at Christmas time. And when you think about it this whole notion of "grace alone" becomes a reality through the work of "Christ alone." And when we say "Christ alone" we are saying that only Christ can save. And taking this back to the 16th century and the debates that raged back then, saying "Christ alone" meant that it is Christ, and not the church that is the mediator of salvation. And because we are saved through Christ alone we, we the sinful

people that we are, we are considered righteous in Christ. And it is all because of Christ dying on the cross for our sins.

And so "grace alone" is a reality through "Christ alone." "When those great Reformers spoke about "Christ alone," they never intended to mean that Christ was at work apart from the broader activity of God. They believed that grace was at work through the Trinity. That grace is the favor of God the Father made visibly real in God the Son, Jesus Christ, and brought to bear concretely in the human experience by the power of the Holy Spirit." (*John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century*, William Stacy Johnson, p. 27) Christ alone.

Which brings us to the third point today, **Faith Alone**. So let me summarize where we are- We worship a God who is FOR us by being WITH us in Jesus Christ. And there is one more piece to this puzzle- **this same God who is FOR us by being WITH us in Jesus Christ is still working AMONG us by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

And this is where faith comes in and this is where our passage today from Romans comes into play. It is our faith through which God's purposes are carried out. Let me explain. "Luther summed up the doctrine of justification in the phrase, 'justification by grace through faith.' [Luther was impacted by the third chapter of Romans where it says in vs. 24 and 28, "They are now justified by his grace," and "For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works ..."] Sometimes we hear people speak simply of 'justification by faith.' This does not mean that our faith activates or causes us to become justified in God's sight. To say this would be to make salvation dependent on human action; it would in essence make faith into a 'work.' But the idea is not that faith saves. We are made just in God's sight not by any decision or merit on our part but solely by receiving God's grace. And this grace is received through the gift of faith.... An example.... Sound travels in waves, but unless a receiver is tuned to the frequency of the sound waves, the sound will not be picked up.

God's saving grace [is plentiful], but the only way to receive that saving grace is to have the frequency set on 'faith.' By adopting a[n attitude] of faith in God, we open ourselves to receive the grace that saves." (p.27)

You see, Calvin believed faith to be the working of the Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit who works to unite us to Christ. And this union with Christ was huge for Calvin. But Calvin saw this faith as needing to be put into action and not seen as a passive virtue. Faith should be active and spiritual. And Calvin was deeply concerned that the Protestant church's teaching about justification was too lopped-sided. To say that we are forgiven through the free righteousness of Christ, apart from works, could move one to neglect the importance of living a moral life. You see, Calvin believed that God's grace as mercy for us was crucially tied to God's grace as power in us. This is where **Calvin weaved together a doctrine known as double grace. "There is the grace by which one is *reckoned* righteous once and for all.**

This is the first form of grace, the forgiveness that Protestants called 'justification.' There is also a second form of grace by which one is *made righteous over time; this is the grace that Calvin called "sanctification."* This is why when we say YES to Jesus Christ we are justified by grace through faith. And this notion of sanctification, which means "being set apart as holy" is something that only happens as the Christian grows and matures in their faith. And folks, this takes a lifetime and only at our death is it complete.

Let me just conclude this sermon today by saying that it was during the 16th century that the church rediscovered the message of salvation by grace. The tragedy is that the rediscovery of this message of grace led, despite the best intentions of the Reformers themselves, to a massive split between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Since then there have been numerous efforts to reach mutual understanding... **In 1999 the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches issued a historic 'Joint Declaration on**

Justification.' For centuries Lutherans and other Protestants have upheld the primacy of justification by grace through faith, while the Roman Catholic Church has insisted that faith must be accompanied by good works. The Joint Declaration tries to heal these divisions. One of its central affirmations seeks to balance the Protestant emphasis on justification (making us right) and the Catholic stress on sanctification (making us holy). [I leave you with] the statement [that] reads as follows: 'Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.' This is a remarkable affirmation of Protestant and Catholic unity, achieved after over four hundred years of strife." (p. 29) Grace alone; Christ alone; faith alone.

Join me next Sunday as we look at another theme for Calvin which was "Scripture Alone." Amen.

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Introduction: William MacDonald, *The Grace of God*

Four Reformation mottos: Grace alone, Christ alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone

First, **Grace Alone**

Calvin's and Luther's question: "How can a sinful human being come into the presence of a holy God?"

When was the last time the word "holy" or "holiness" was in a title?

Let's look at **the notion of** _____

Instead of worrying over his own righteousness, Luther came up with a New kind of righteousness- the righteousness of _____

Second, **Christ Alone**

Solidarity- that is what God did in Jesus Christ- God became flesh

Christ alone meant...

Third, **Faith Alone**

This same God who is _____ us by being _____ us in Jesus Christ is still working _____ us by the power of the Holy Spirit

"Justification by faith through grace"

Faith needed to be put into action and not seen as a passive virtue
Calvin weaved together a doctrine known as _____ grace

There is grace by which one is **reckoned** righteous once and for all. This is the first form of grace, the forgiveness that Protestants called _____

There is also a second form of grace by which one is **made** righteous over time; this is the grace Calvin called _____

Conclusion: In 1999 the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches issued a historic "Joint Declaration on Justification"- an affirmation of unity after over 400 years of strife.