

Sola Gratia: The End of Human Boasting

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Introduction

"We are beggars. This is true." - Martin Luther¹

These were the final written words of a man who had not only spent decades expounding the truth that we are saved by grace *alone*, but who had also been profoundly shaped by such truth. He realized, even in spite of his enormous accomplishments, that his only hope before God was not in his *bringing*, but in his *begging*. Timothy George, commenting on these famous last words, wrote, "*Luther's whole approach to the Christian life is summed up in these last words. The posture of the human vis a vis God is one of utter receptivity. We have no legs of our own on which to stand. No mystical 'ground of the soul' can serve as a basis of our union with the divine. We can earn no merits that will purchase for us a standing before God. We are beggars—needy, vulnerable, totally bereft of resources with which to save ourselves. For Luther, the good news of the gospel was that in Jesus Christ God had become a beggar too. God identified with us in our neediness. Like the good Samaritan who exposed himself to the dangers of the road to attend to the dying man in the ditch, God 'came where we were.'*"²

The reformation was, among other things, a recovery of the precious truth that we are saved by grace alone: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast*" (Eph. 2:8-9). The Scriptures testify that salvation is fundamentally a gift to be received by faith, not the reward for our works. We didn't earn it. We don't deserve it. We didn't achieve it. We can't step back in any way and say, 'that was me.'

However, beyond celebrating the recovery of the gospel *back then*, I want us to see the ongoing need to recover the gospel *now*. This battle for the recovery of salvation by grace alone was *not* a new battle; nor was it the last time the church of Jesus Christ would have to refute false understandings of salvation by grace, and clarify the truth of the gospel. This struggle continues even today, and the reason why it continues is that the human heart, apart from Christ, has always been and always will be opposed to the grace of God. The human heart loves to *boast*. We say, 'I'm really not that bad', 'the problem is them not me', 'I'm a good person', 'I'm better than most people', or 'I can make up for my wrongs'. This resistance to God's grace is not a uniquely catholic problem. It is not a uniquely medieval problem. It is a *human* problem. Why? Because we are proud, and grace humbles us. Grace disarms us of the illusion of total control. It robs us of our boasting and dismantles our trust in our goodness and self-righteousness. It confronts us with our total spiritual inability, and the devastating effects of sin. Grace reminds us of our helplessness and desperate *need* for saving – that we cannot be our own savior. Grace is

¹ Timothy George. *Theology of the Reformers, Revised Edition*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 105.

² *Ibid.* 105.

the enemy of human pride and self-exaltation, and we have resisted and opposed God's grace since the fall.

In this brief paper, I want to begin to answer the question, 'Why must the doctrine of *sola gratia* continue to be carefully articulated and defended today?' To do so I will first attempt to demonstrate that self-exaltation is opposed to God's grace, and that self-exaltation is a problem of all sinful humanity. Second, I will briefly consider how this problem has been manifested throughout history, and is indeed the 'spirit of our age' (1Cor. 2:6-16). Third, I will consider from Scripture the true condition of humanity, and the good news that salvation is by grace alone by examining our *need* for salvation, the *cause* of our salvation, God's gracious *work* in saving us, and God's ultimate *goal* of our salvation. Lastly, I will close with four personal and pastoral 'fruits' that result from embracing the doctrine of *sola gratia*.

Grace and Self-Exaltation

In the Bible, God's work of salvation by grace alone is repeatedly contrasted with human boasting and self-exaltation. Paul writes:

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8-9).

One of God's purposes in salvation by grace alone is the silencing of human self-exaltation. God accomplishes this by removing all ground for boasting (cf. 1 Cor. 1:29; Judges 7:2). The essence of human boasting is this: attributing to self what should only be attributed to God. Why did God reduce Gideon's army from over 30 000 to 300? We are told it was to silence their boasting:

"The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'" (Judges 7:2)

Human boasting is antithetical to salvation by grace alone, and is rooted in the self-exalting nature of sinful mankind. A helpful passage of Scripture that exposes the antithesis between boastful self-exaltation and grace is found in the Gospel of Luke:

"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.'" (Luke 18:9-14).

First, we see from the end of the parable that the two men represent two postures towards God. The Pharisee represents those who 'exalt themselves.' This self-exaltation will ultimately result

in being ‘humbled’ by God, and not justified before him. The tax collector, on the other hand, demonstrated humility as he threw himself wholeheartedly upon the mercy of God. Rather than trust in himself, he despaired of himself. He was aware of both his miserable and hopeless condition before God, and the mercy of God. In other words, he was fully dependent upon the grace of God alone. The Pharisee was marked by self-righteousness and self-confidence. He boasted of his own works (fasting and tithing), even as he offered a pretentious prayer. Significantly, this prayer illustrates the human proclivity to attempt to ‘mix’ grace and works. The Pharisee does indeed thank *God* for how good he is. He seems to acknowledge that God played *some* role in his life. However, he was not trusting in God’s mercy *alone*, but in himself and his own righteousness.

The controversy surrounding the reformation did not arise because there was no previous concept of grace. Rather, the battle was over whether or not salvation is by grace *alone*. According to Scripture, there is no other kind of salvation by grace:

“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” (Rom. 11:6).

To attempt to mix our works with God’s grace, as the Pharisee did, is to distort both. In order to maintain his sense of self-righteousness, the Pharisee actually had to distort God’s standard, and falsely elevate himself as meeting that standard. He focused on outward works (fasting, tithing) that he felt he could accomplish, and implied that he did not sin in the ways others did. But Jesus taught that the problem of sin runs much deeper:

“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt. 5:28).

“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.” (Matt. 15:19-20)

Self-exaltation can only flourish with self-deception. By deceiving himself about the nature of sin, the Pharisee was able to convince himself he wasn’t really that bad. He didn’t see himself as a sinner, but a righteous person. He thought he was better than others, and looked down on them. God was not his Savior, but at best, his helper.

This parable contrasts the difference between the Christian gospel and all the man-made religions of the world. Man-made religions are all an attempt of mankind to exalt himself, to say, ‘I am good. I am better than others. I am righteous. I do not need forgiveness. I am sovereign. I am in control.’ The gospel is not a call to striving, achieving, or earning. It is the end of boasting in self, and instead a call to receive Christ, by grace, through faith:

“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 Cor. 1:27-31).

Self-Exaltation a Human Problem

This human pride and self-exaltation was not confined to one individual, in one place, at one time. It is a characteristic of all fallen, sinful mankind, and has continued to be manifested through history in different ways at different times. In the 4th and 5th centuries, the early church battled the false teaching of a British monk named Pelagius, who took issue with Augustine's theology of grace. At the heart of his teaching was a denial of original sin, and an emphasis on human autonomy and ability to achieve salvation through their own effort and moral improvement.³ In essence, it was 'we may have gotten ourselves into this problem, it's not that bad, and we can certainly get ourselves out of it.' Indeed, although his teaching was formally condemned as heresy, the heart of it remained because its substance remained in the hearts of mankind.

This was evident especially at the time of the reformation. According to Michael Horton, the reformers "recognized that pelagianism was the working theology of their day, although it remained officially condemned."⁴ We must not overlook the significance of this statement. Despite the fact that pelagianism had been formally condemned as heresy, it was not only present, but widespread. This is because human beings are 'functional pelagians.' We are not born reformed. In our sinful condition, we under-estimate our problem and over-estimate our abilities. In other words, we have the problem of pride and self-exaltation. Pelagianism is simply a manifestation of our human pride, and is thus reoccurring.

Our Present Ministry Context: 'New Pelagianism'

Despite the fact that many do not employ this term anymore, this view is the dominant view of our own day. Michael Horton goes so far as to describe modernity as "a secularized pelagianism." He describes this 'new pelagianism' in these words:

"the human being is no longer regarded as in every way dependent upon, or even answerable to, a Creator, but is treated as a self-sufficient creator in his or her own right, constructing reality in whatever shape autonomous reason, volition, and emotion determine. Sin, instead of being viewed as an offense against a holy God, is seen merely as wrongs committed against other people, or simply as offenses against oneself. This requires a program for individual and social transformation, not the announcement of divine rescue."⁵

William Ernest Henley wrote in 1875, the poem *Invictus*. This poem has been used as inspiration by many, including Nelson Mandela during his long times of imprisonment. It helpfully captures the spirit of the age:

³ Michael Horton. *Sola Gratia*. In *After Darkness, Light*, Ed. R.C. Sproul Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 112.

⁴ *Ibid.* 112.

⁵ *Ibid.* 113-114.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.⁶*

‘I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.’ In this view, we are sovereign. We are above judgement. We are unconquerable. We don’t need saving. We are proud. ‘God helps those who help themselves’ has turned into ‘Whatever help I need will come from *me*.’

Charles Taylor helpfully describes the secular age in which we live as the ‘age of authenticity.’⁷ In summary, to be ‘authentic’ is to be true to oneself, and free from external constraints and pressures to conform. The individual is the locus of reality and truth. The highest moral value, necessarily, is the right for absolute *choice*.

Of course, one major problem with identifying the individual as the locus of authority to determine truth is that it is not *actually* possible for *all* individuals to adopt this view. This ‘expressive individualism’ is an empty charade. The individual is not *actually* protected and upheld, but rather, destroyed. It is impossible for every individual to express themselves in ways that do not simultaneously limit the ability of other individuals to express themselves. We are seeing the chaos of such a worldview in our political and ethical discussions, particularly surrounding human sexuality and abortion.

Since the individual’s rights must be protected at all costs, and yet, we cannot *actually* protect competing ‘rights’ in the same way, there will always need to be a decision regarding *whose* ‘rights’ to protect. This must necessarily be done with power through coercion.

A prime example of this incoherence is the abortion debate. It is hardly debated anymore whether or not the unborn baby is a human individual; and yet, the loud chant of those in favour

⁶ William Ernest Henley, *Invictus*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51642/invictus>

⁷ See James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014) for an accessible summary of Taylor’s thought and insight.

of this horror is ‘Choice!’ The moral weight of this word surpasses any argument or evidence. The ultimate evil is not to *do* evil, but to limit an individual’s choice or ability to determine what evil is. Of course, this presents a clear example of the incoherence of such a worldview. Why are the ‘choices’ of the weak individual not protected in the same degree as those of the strong? Because this isn’t really about *everyone*’s choice, but *my* choice. The weak and vulnerable individuals will always suffer under this worldview. Regarding issues of sexuality, the moral decision is the one that allows for ultimate self-expression. We seem to be reaching a climax of chaos as this worldview is pushed to its limits in the practises surrounding the transgender movement.

Aside from being incoherent and dangerous, this worldview is predicated upon a distorted view of mankind. In an attempt to exalt ourselves, we have actually *lost* a realistic understanding of ourselves. This, in relation to the topic at hand, has blinded us to our need for grace. We might say that we live in an age that glories in our self-exaltation. It is into this world that the gospel shines as a light, exposing our great need and the amazing grace God has given to meet that need.

The Need for Knowledge of Self and God

The ‘spirit of the age,’ however, is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We cannot begin to grasp the grace of God if we do not have an accurate understanding of ourselves and our own profound *need*. Self-exaltation can only flourish with self-deception. Self-exaltation is not the response to our true selves and condition, but an illusion that we deceitfully maintain. John Calvin noted the need for an accurate view of self and God in the opening of his *Institutes*:

*“Our wisdom, if it is to be thought genuine, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. As these are closely connected, it is not easy to decide which comes first and gives rise to the other. To begin with, no one can assess himself without turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves...”*⁸

This knowledge causes us to despair of ourselves and see our need for God:

*“So our feelings of ignorance, vanity, need, weakness and general depravity remind us that in the Lord, and no one else, can be found the true light of light of wisdom... Our evil ways make us think of all the good things of God. We can never really seek him in earnest until we begin to despair of ourselves. Don’t we all rely on our own strength when we are not aware of our real nature and are quite content with our own gifts, ignoring our misery? When we do come to ourselves, we are spurred on to seek God and are led by his hand to find him.”*⁹

However, this knowledge of ourselves cannot come by looking at ourselves, but rather, to God. Calvin writes:

⁸ John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1987), 21.

⁹ *Ibid.* 22.

“On the other hand, it is evident that man never arrives at true self-knowledge before he has looked into the face of God and then comes away to look at himself. For (such is our innate pride) we always seem to ourselves just and upright, wise and holy until we are convinced, by clear proof, of our injustice and deviousness, stupidity and impurity. However, we are never convinced of this if we simply look to ourselves and not to the Lord as well, since he is the only yardstick from which this conviction can come. For since we all have the tendency to hypocrisy, any hollow appearance of righteousness is quite enough to satisfy us instead of righteousness itself...It is like an eye which has never been shown anything other than black, assessing an object which is really off-white or discoloured as pure white.”¹⁰

But where will we find such knowledge of God and ourselves? As Calvin affirms, it is only by the Spirit working through the word that we come to such knowledge of God and ourselves:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” (2 Corinthians 4:6)

It is no coincidence that the biblical understanding that we are saved by grace alone was recovered at the same time that the written word of God was being read and restored to the people of God. We cannot understand God’s grace if we do not understand our state of misery. Indeed, all illusions of self-righteousness and ability come crashing down before the word of God. The only sure place to look in order to understand ourselves and our condition, as well as the grace God has provided, is not our experience, but Scripture. There are few passages of Scripture that give such a vivid description of our salvation by grace alone than those written in the letter of Paul to the Ephesian church:

“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. 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. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship,

¹⁰ Ibid. 22.

created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Ephesians 2:1–10)

Reading Ephesians 2:1-10 is like sitting in a doctor’s office and hearing the worst diagnosis you could ever imagine, but then having the joy of them explaining there is a perfect, indestructible cure. Through this passage God reveals the devastating effects of sin and our powerless state to change things. We are *totally* lost and unable to do anything about it. And yet, there is a cure for our state that cannot fail: *salvation by Grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone*. From this passage (Ephesians 2:1-10), we must understand four things about this glorious salvation: 1) our desperate *need* for salvation, 2) the *cause* of our salvation being the love of God, 3) the gracious *work* of God in our salvation, and 4) the *goal* of God saving us by grace.

1. The Need for Saving by Grace Alone: Dead, Enslaved, Condemned (vv. 1-3)

We cannot understand the riches of God’s grace if we do not understand our problem. A life vest is only good news for those who are drowning, not those safely at shore. Unless we understand the depth of our sin and its consequences, grace will appear unnecessary, like the antidote to a disease we do not truly believe we have.

In this passage, Paul contrasts life before we were in Christ with life after we are in Christ. Before Christ, we see three dreadful realities: we are dead, enslaved, condemned – and helpless to do anything about it. In other words, we were in desperate *need* of saving.

The first description Paul gives of life outside of Christ is devastating: We all were dead. “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked*” (v. 1).

As noted, Paul is not only referring to his audience, but to ‘all of mankind’ as he will later state in verse 3. The consequences of the fall are not confined to some people, but affect all people. One commentator writes, “*The spiritual state of the readers when they were outside of Christ, as well as of the rest of humanity, is death. The apostle’s description is not that of some particularly decadent tribe or degraded segment of society, or even of the extremely corrupt paganism of his own day. Rather, it is the biblical diagnosis of fallen man in fallen society everywhere.*”¹¹ We are either ‘in Christ’, or ‘in trespasses and sins.’ This truth should humble us, and is a death-blow to self-exaltation. Remember, contempt for others and comparing our works to theirs is a deceitful means we employ to convince ourselves we are in no real need. But here, Paul makes explicit that all mankind suffers from the same condition: death. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But

¹¹ Peter Thomas O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 156.

the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”¹²

The consequence of sin is death – spiritual, and finally, physical. As Paul says elsewhere, *‘the wages of sin is death’* (Rom 6:23). The ‘spiritual’ death Paul describes in this passage refers to a state of alienation from the life of God (Eph. 4:18). In other words, death is personal and relational. Paul describes this spiritual death in his letter to the Romans:

*“as it is written:
 “None is righteous, no, not one;
 no one understands;
 no one seeks for God.
 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
 no one does good,
 not even one.””* (Rom 3:10-12).

We don’t know God, and we don’t want to. We don’t love him. We don’t need him. This death has left us alienated from Christ, without any hope of changing our condition (2:12). In death, we are utterly helpless. What a dead person needs is resurrection, not a helping hand – and a dead person cannot raise themselves. A dead person does not contribute to their resurrection. A biblical understanding of our spiritual condition apart from Christ removes any foundation of works that we might hope to contribute to our salvation. If anything can be done, it won’t be done by us. It will need to be the work of God, by grace alone.

The second description Paul gives of our condition apart from Christ is that of being enslaved. Peter O’Brien writes, *“The reader’s former lifestyle, which characterizes all who are outside of Christ, was not true freedom but evidence of a fearful bondage to forces over which they had no control.”¹³* This is a reality-check for our culture that views humans as free, autonomous beings. It confronts us with the reality that our choices are *not* neutral, but heavily influenced by outside forces. We are slaves, and we don’t even know it.

Ephesians 2:2-3 shows that, before Christ, we were under the powerful influence of three forces: i) the world, ii) the flesh, and iii) the devil.

i) We were in bondage to the ‘course of this world.’ The worldly ways are not merely the latest trends in fashion, but rather, *“society’s attitudes, habits, and preferences, which were alien to God and his standards.”¹⁴* We like to think we are willing to ‘stand against the crowd.’ But Scripture tells us we simply go along with ‘the course of this world.’ The popular cultural archetype of the ‘hero’ is a powerful image, but it is not us. We *are* the crowd.

¹² Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago Abridged*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2007).

¹³ O’Brien. 156.

¹⁴ Ibid. 159.

ii) We ‘lived in the passions of our flesh,’ which is our whole sinful being. The fact that we ‘carried out the desires of the body and the mind’ reveals that we did *what we wanted to do*. We are not enslaved because we can’t gain the freedom we desire; we are enslaved in that we desire what enslaves. *We* are the problem. We need freedom from *us*. Again, this condition of bondage reveals our great need, and total inability.

iii) Lastly, we were under the influence of powerful, personal forces, ‘following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.’ This is our enemy, the devil.

The third and final description Paul gives of our condition is that we were *condemned*. He writes that we were ‘by nature children of wrath’. This reveals that sin is not merely something we *do*. It is a result of *who we are*. We sin because we are sinners. And the consequence for who we are and what we do is the wrath of a personal God.

This is one of the more offensive truths of the gospel: that we are condemned. One way we seek to get around our sense of guilt is by attempting to separate who we are from what we do. I was watching a show, and at one low moment for one of the characters, they considered having an affair. While she was explaining this to her friend, her friend replied with something like, ‘Nothing you do could change what I think of you, that you are a good person.’ She was espousing the popular worldview that we can somehow create a dichotomy between *what we do* and *who we are*. But Jesus said the opposite is true: who we are determines what we do.

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6: 43-45).

Our own deceitfulness and hypocrisy is evident when we fail to apply the same standard to others. We are quick to deny that what we do is a reflection of who we are when we do wrong, but when someone wrongs or offends us, we are so quick to point out that *they* are ‘a bad person’ because of what they’ve done. We also abandon our false-dichotomy when we do ‘good’, and are quick to use it as an example that we are really ‘good people’. However, Jesus says that ‘*No one is good but God*’ (Mark 10:18).

The result of being ‘bad’ people is that we are under God’s wrath. Our greatest need for rescue is rescue *from* God. And the only one who can rescue us *is* God. As Christians, we must meditate regularly on the helpless and hopeless condition Jesus Christ has saved us from.

As a result of the depth of our sin, not only are we under God’s judgement, but we are totally unable to do anything about it. We don’t *want* to do anything about it. This means that we cannot save ourselves. How does God respond to such sin? How does God respond to our spiritual deadness? He responds in love, with grace.

2. The Cause of Salvation by Grace Alone: The great Love of God (vv. 4)

Salvation is not a response of God to our works, goodness, or love, but rather, the overflow of his love for lost sinners. Salvation by grace alone displays the riches of God's love. 'But God' (vv. 4) are two of the most encouraging words in the bible. They signal that God is going to step in himself and do something about our desperate estate. And *why* does he step in? Is it because we are lovable? Is it because we first sought him? Is it because of anything owing to us? No. It is simply because of his great love for us. According to Scripture, God's love is most clearly displayed in his love for *those who do not love him*:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6–8)

Paul's point is this: God's love is unique in that it is demonstrated towards people who do not love him – weak sinners. Maybe, just maybe, someone will love the lovable, and give their life for a good person. But God, in contrast, shows his love in dying for bad people. This is grace. John spoke of God's love in the same way:

"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

In short, to distort God's grace is to distort His love. In a sad irony, many feel compelled to maintain the notion that God somehow responds to our 'loveliness' in order to help people 'feel loved.' The underlying presupposition is, 'True love must love me *for who I am*.' But the biblical picture of God and his love is far superior: God loves us *in spite of who we are*. He does not respond to our loveliness, but his love is what makes us lovely (cf. Eph. 5:25-28). One of the greatest tragedies of ignoring or downplaying the desperate, rebellious, powerless states of sinners apart from God's grace is that it *minimizes the love of God*.

3. The Gracious Work of God in Salvation (vv. 4-10)

The work of God in salvation is the perfect remedy for our condition, and a display of His grace. In Christ, we have resurrection from death – spiritual, and one day, physical. We have freedom from the enslaving influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil. And we have forgiveness instead of condemnation for the penalty our sin deserves.

First, notice that all of the blessings of salvation come to us *in Christ*. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who has done the work of salvation. We are united to *him* by faith, and all that his life, death and resurrection accomplished become ours. To be saved by Grace alone is to be saved by *Christ* alone, for Christ is the grace of God that has appeared bringing salvation to all men (Titus 2:11). He is grace personified; the supreme display of the grace of God. This is the most important point to grasp in understanding the biblical doctrine of the grace of God: that grace is not a *thing*, but ultimately, Jesus Christ. God does not simply impart grace to us as something distinct from himself, but rather gives himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Practically, grace is not some

‘spiritual strength’ we are given to jump-start our dead batteries. It is not some pre-conversion power we add to our own works and strength to increase our receptivity to Christ. Indeed, the battle of the reformation was really a battle over the word *alone*. To form a theology of grace that is something distinct from Christ is to distort grace. Further, this allows for grace to be something ‘added’ to our works. But to receive grace *is* to receive Christ. This also demonstrates the inseparability of the solas: to be saved by grace alone is to be saved by Christ alone, through faith alone.

Paul writes that we have been ‘made alive together with Christ’ and ‘raised’ with him. That is, we have been resurrected from spiritual death to spiritual life. Carl Truman comments appropriately on this reality, writing:

“We do not need spiritual healing, for that would imply we are merely in need of repair. We need spiritual resurrection. And resurrection is the unilateral act of God, not a cooperative exercise between the living God and the dead. That is vital for an accurate understanding of grace. Grace is not God giving wholesome advice of a helping hand. It is God raising someone from the dead, first Christ and then those who are in Christ.”¹⁵

Next, we see that we have been made a ‘new creation.’ If the problem is our very nature, we need a new nature. We need to be made into a new creation. This is precisely what Paul says God has done in our lives if we are united to Christ:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10).

In the Kingdom of God there are no ‘self-made’ men. As the Psalmist writes, there are only people God makes, by his grace:

*“Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and not we ourselves;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” (Psalm 100:3)*

We did not create ourselves, and we cannot re-create ourselves. It is the gracious work of God alone. This resurrection and new creation in Christ brings freedom from the things we were enslaved to. We are given new hearts and a new nature. We are born again (cf. John 3).

Lastly, when Paul writes that we have been ‘saved’ (vv. 5, 8), he means we have been saved *from* the wrath of God. How? In Christ. The wrath of God was poured out on him at the cross, where he was the ‘propitiation for our sins’ (1 John 4:10). We could not ‘repay’ God or ‘make up’ for our sins. They must be punished. Christ, instead of us, was punished. As Paul says, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Cor. 5:21). He was raised from the dead, and us with him.

¹⁵ Carl Truman. *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God*, Ed. Matthew Barrett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017) Page 41.

4. The Goal of Salvation by Grace Alone: The Praise of God's Glorious Grace (vv. 7)

Thus far we have considered how salvation by grace alone silences human self-exaltation and boasting. However, this not the ultimate goal of God in salvation, but rather, a necessary step towards that goal. The goal of God in salvation is the praise of his glory. Why does God save his people by grace? Paul tells us:

"...so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (v. 7)

Why, in the ages to come, will God put 'the immeasurable riches of his grace' on display? Paul tells us earlier in his letter:

"In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved." (Ephesians 1:4b-6)

The purpose of God *showing* the immeasurable riches of his grace is that his glorious grace would be *praised*. As we have already seen, God's grace is supremely revealed in Jesus Christ. To praise God's glorious grace is to praise God himself, which is why Paul says in verse 12 of chapter 1 that God's purpose in our salvation is the praise of his glory. We see his glory most fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4-6). Thus, when we praise God's glorious grace or his glory, we are praising *him*.

This explains, coming full circle, why God works our salvation in such a way that cuts the root of self-exaltation and human boasting. Human boasting is essentially ascribing glory to others for what God alone should be glorified for. God has worked our salvation in such a way that he *alone* is glorified (*soli Deo gloria*). Salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is how God alone receives glory. Here is our greatest argument and motivation for a continued articulation and defense of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone: the glory of God.

Personal and Pastoral Fruit of *Sola Gratia*: Humility, Joy, and Patience (both in prayer, and the ministry of the Word)

The Lord knew I needed to be reminded again of his grace in Jesus Christ. We are just as in need of, and dependent upon the grace of God as any man. I want to close by suggesting some personal and pastoral fruit that come from embracing *sola gratia*; humility, joy, patience, and prayer. Are our lives and ministries characterized by the humble dependence of the tax collector? Is there an unshakeable joy beneath our laboring? Are we marked by patience and prayer for the dead, enslaved, and condemned?

Humility

Brothers, we were not born 'reformed.' We were once 'in Adam', and were dead, enslaved, condemned. Nor did we 'reform' ourselves. Pelagius is not the source of boasting – it begins in our own hearts. Through the light of the gospel, the Spirit of God opened our eyes to see the glory of Jesus Christ. I was convicted of this recently when I made a critical comment about Rob

Bell, a well-known bible teacher who seems to have walked away from the faith. My comment was not unfair or harsh, but as soon as I made it, I remembered sitting on the dock of my friend's cottage as a teenager reading Rob Bell's book. I finished it, and immediately told my friends to 'take up and read.' In remembering this, I was convicted of my own pride, not in criticizing a false teacher (which is necessary), but in forgetting that I was once Rob Bell's follower. I once stumbled in the dark, loving anything that scratched the itch in my heart for self-exaltation. But for God's grace, I would be a false teacher; a proud and conceited man, leading others astray in my folly. Even now we all wrestle against the flesh, which *loves* to boast. We must stand confidently on the doctrines of grace, being willing and able to defend and articulate these precious truths. But we must never be proud of them.

Joy

True humility, that recognizes our *true* condition and depends fully on the grace of God, is always exalted by God. Consider the overflow of songs that resulted from the Spirit's work in the Reformation. This no coincidence, but is consistent with God's very goal in salvation by Grace Alone: the praise of his glorious grace. A true, Spirit-fueled, Scripture-based, heart-awakening grasp of the grace of God results in an explosion of joy. In this world, we will have trouble. Our labor will not be easy. But we should, in the midst of our sorrow, be characterized by rejoicing (2 Cor. 6:10). If you are like me and this joy has not marked your ministry, then let us return together to the streams of God's grace in Jesus Christ, and drink deeply until our song rises again. Brothers, we ought to be joy-filled beggars.

Patience in Prayer and when Ministering the Word

When we are confronted in Scripture with the reality of our condition apart from Jesus Christ, and the depth of his grace towards us in Christ, we should be moved to patience for others. Indeed, we at one time were '*alienated from God and were hostile in our minds because of our evil deeds.*' (Col. 1:21). It is only through the reconciling work of Christ that we have been saved (Col. 1:22). Like the high priests of the old covenant, we ought to '*deal gently with those who are ignorant and misguided, since [we ourselves are] beset with weakness*' (Heb. 5:2). This patience must be evident in our prayerfulness and in our ministry of the word. Paul's instruction to Timothy includes the exhortation to "*preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*" (2 Tim. 4:2). Many overlook the fact that our teaching and preaching ought to be characterized by *patience*. Why? Because, ultimately, salvation is a work of God. We must give ourselves, as Paul tells Timothy, to the task of preaching and teaching Christ with full devotion (cf. 1 Tim 4:11-16), while at the same time, be fully dependent upon God to graciously work in our lives and the lives of our hearers. Recognizing our powerlessness, we ought to be marked by prayerful dependence, as Paul was for the church:

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:14–19).

Conclusion:

The Church of Jesus Christ desperately needs to recover the radical nature of Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. We need to hold up the clarifying-light of Scripture to the confusion of human experience, exposing the depth of our fall and the magnitude of our need. It is only in the Scriptures that we find the true description of our condition. This is not an end in itself, in the same way a diagnosis is not the treatment. But we will never understand God or ourselves, or appreciate His grace until we understand our total *need*. We need to recognize that part of mankind's lost condition is the proclivity towards self-exaltation and boasting. These qualities make us blind and resistant to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Since this is a part of our fallen condition, we will always have to be defending *sola gratia*; not merely as an exercise of historical theology, but as an application of the gospel *today*. Until Jesus returns, sinful man will continue to exalt himself, and the light of the gospel will be needed to expose the darkness of our condition, and the source of our hope: Christ. Lastly, we must continue to be personally shaped by the grace of God. This will bear the fruit of humility, joy, and patience in our prayer and our ministry of the word.

Soli Deo Gloria.