

Sola Gratia

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October 5, 2008

That is [Wartburg] Castle on the screen. I took that picture last winter when Greg Grande and I came back from Russia [and] we stopped by in Germany and did our blitzkrieg tour in two days. [We] got to see all the places that Luther lived and did school stuff in. You can just [imagine] Luther hiding in one of those little rooms up there along the side, translating the Old Testament. We'll learn more about that later. It's pretty interesting that Luther described himself as a person who was just sitting around, writing letters all day, corresponding with people, translating the Bible into German in a few weeks, and just doing nothing. He felt like he was really shelved because he was only doing huge amounts of work. Anyway, different times, I guess.

As I mentioned earlier, we are going to be spending a week on each of the *solas* of the Reformation. This morning I want to turn our attention to *sola gratia*, [which means] "by grace alone." We're eventually going to be looking at Romans 3:23–24, but you can just turn to the beginning of the book of Romans for now. We'll get there in a little bit.

During the Dark Ages, the Church was in miserable condition. It's pretty easy to understand why. There were basically two branches of the Church at that time. If you read historians, they'll tell you there [was only] one. There was one medieval Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and that was the medieval church of the time. But actually, within the larger,

very corrupt Roman Catholic Church, there were true believers within that system [who] we might call the “true” medieval Church. There was a righteous remnant, as God always has at any time in any place. There [were] no Christian bookstores at that time, there were no sermons online, there were no study Bibles that you could go down and buy, [no] tapes or CDs to listen to, no systematic theologies you could pick up somewhere. Books were extremely rare. Books about God were rarer still. The people who had these books were [in] the Church. They had these libraries and they guarded them viciously. They were like vaults of treasure that only a few of the elite, the scholars and monks, could study.

Imagine having church after church in city after city in a country, and having nobody in any of those congregations [who] had his own Bible. Think about that. Even though the Bible says we are to study the Scriptures, meditate on the Scriptures [see Psalm 119:148], let the Word of Christ dwell within us richly [see Colossians 3:16], and meditate on these things day and night [see Joshua 1:8], nobody ha[d] a Bible. You can just imagine the weight of that. Even if you wanted to know the Scriptures, how [would] you get access to the Bible? Of course, Bibles were made, but they cost a fortune. That’s why only kings and extremely rich people could even own a Bible, because it had to be hand copied.

Yet even during the Dark Ages, there was [a] true group of believers in the medieval Church. They didn’t know much. They didn’t have deep theology. They didn’t have this vast understanding of the contents of the Bible, and all those things, but what they had [was] a few creeds, a few little condensed sayings. The Church would often [have] councils [that] would get together, and they’d try to distill down into [their] essence the fundamentals of Christianity. The Apostles’ Creed [is an example of this]. Sometimes we sing it here on Sunday morning. Even though it was written long, long ago, way before the Dark Ages, we’re still singing that creed. [It says] things like, “I believe in God the Father, Almighty Maker of heaven

and earth, and [in] Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord.”¹ That is a creed, [in which] they condensed down the essence of Christianity.

At that time, [during the Dark Ages], the few faithful remnant [had] these creeds. They would memorize these creeds and that’s all they knew. They would go to church, but the church service was often in Latin. They didn’t hear anything [they understood]—it was just like listening to someone speak in tongues, [or in a] different language. You didn’t know what was going on. You were just kind of keeping your eye [out], and when people got up, you got up. When they sat down, [you] sat down. There was a little bit of truth sprinkled in with the songs, [and] there were pictures and statues around the churches, so you [could] kind of see the gospel story, so you had just a little bit of truth. Yet, even though there was just a very little bit of truth, there were a few righteous people who trusted in what we would call the “fundamentals of the evangelical faith”: that God saves us by His grace, that it is through Christ—His death, burial, and resurrection—and faith and trust in that that God saves a sinner.

One of these families with this very simple faith was the family of Hans and Margarete Luther. Though they did not know it at the time, they taught their sons, one of them being Martin, these essential truths, that you needed to live for God, you needed to live for God’s glory, you needed to trust in God, that forgiveness could be had by believing in God, [and that] God gave forgiveness to those who believed in Him. [They had] just that basic, basic truth. Little did they know at the time, but their son, Martin, would thunder these truths forth from the pulpit in Wittenberg and other places in Germany so forcefully that it would transform the entire country and [later] the entire world. If you’re a parent, just remember that. You may be thinking to yourself, “You know, I keep telling my kids [the truth], and I wonder if it’s going in.” Just remember [that] even a little bit of truth God can use to sprout a big oak.

¹The full text of the Apostles’ Creed is available at:
<http://www.creeds.net/ancient/apostles.htm>

Martin's parents knew that if Martin was ever going to escape from the next generation of being a peasant in their family, that he would need an education, yet educations were hard to come by. There were little roving bands of [what] you might describe as hellions. They were actually kids who would be set out on the road—ten, eleven, twelve years old—[with] other ones who were thirteen, fourteen, [or] fifteen, [and who] would take [the younger kids] and treat them as slaves, and teach them how to beg and steal. They were supposedly getting an education, [but really] they wandered around in these little packs of starving kids [and] used it as an excuse for trying to get an education. [Martin's parents] were able to make sure he didn't become one of those little monsters, and got him into a school—a very rough school. A rich lady was there and helped pay for his room and board so that he could study a little bit.

We don't really know anything about his early childhood except for a couple of instances that Luther tells us about in his works. Two things stand out in particular. One was of a man that he met while a young boy—high school age—in this school. This man was a prince of Anhalt. This was a wealthy man, a nobleman, a person with great wealth. [He] chose to dress himself in rags, to walk around with a beggar's cane, hunched over, with bare feet, though he was a young, healthy man. He would pray repetitiously, day and night, he would fast, he would scourge himself, beat himself. Why? [It was] because this young man was trying to get close to God. He was doing everything he could to try and get close to God. Even though he had at his disposal all the treasures of the world, he was just in desperate straits to get close to God. Yet, he was miserable, fearful, and wasting away in his efforts. Luther never forgot that because that man was the epitome of somebody trying to find favor with God by his own efforts.

Later on, Luther came upon something else that struck him and then later on in his life had a huge impact on him. This second thing was a picture he saw in a church. It was a picture of a large, masted ship. On that ship, the pope was the captain, cardinals and bishops were the officers, and monks were the deckhands. The Holy Spirit was shown blowing the

sails and sending that ship on its way to heaven. In the water, thrashing about, some drowning, some clinging to the side of the ship, and a few holding on to the [dangling] ropes that the monks had thrown over from the side, were the princes, nobles, peasants, and common folk, who were clinging [and] trying to hang on to that ship that they might get to heaven, too. Martin noticed, though, that not a single cardinal, bishop, or monk was in the water. It left a powerful impression upon him, and later he saw the selfishness, pride, [and] exclusiveness of the Roman Catholic system and priestcraft, which portrayed the clergy as those who were going to heaven and those who were able to save those who were drowning in sin.

Of course, Martin did not come to these conclusions immediately. As a matter of fact, he tried to become [one of those men in the ship]. Luther's father wanted Martin to become a law student. After his business started doing well, he sent Luther to a university, where he studied [and] became [a] brilliant student. He was the model student, almost at the very top of his class. Everybody envied the student Martin Luther except Martin Luther [himself] because inside Luther was this war that was raging, this trauma that was going on. The more he grew in knowledge, the more miserable he became because he realized he was a sinner and [that] God was going to judge him. He couldn't get the thought out of his mind.

To the great displeasure of his father [and] without consulting his father, after a series of events happened in his life—a friend died, he was almost struck down in a thunderstorm—[Luther] just decided to enter into a convent and become a monk. Martin did this, he said this later on, to try and save his soul. He was beginning to become like the prince of Anhalt that he [had seen], doing everything *he* could to try and please God. He figured [that] the monastery, this Augustinian convent, was obviously the best place to be, [thinking that] if you're going to get close to God, become a monk.

Of course, when Martin set his mind to do a thing, he did it with all his might, so he became the exemplary monk-in-training. He fasted, prayed, [and] sometimes went three days without eating or drinking. He prayed, crawled on his knees, and did whatever he could, did all the rituals that

were prescribed to him over and over again, trying to get close [to] God. [But] he was only empty because he knew that as [well] as he could do the rituals, as [well] as he could practice the system, he knew his heart wasn't right, he knew he wasn't doing these acts to the greatest degree he possibly could, and that God was perfect, God was just, and that he wasn't cutting it before God. While everybody else looked at him, and said, "Oh, he is such a great monk-in-training," Luther said, "Oh, yeah? That's what you think, but I know what God sees, [and] I am a sinner and I am imperfect. God is a perfect God and He is going to judge me."

Luther had this double load upon his soul. He had the load of all the rituals of the Roman Catholic Church placed upon him, which he knew he couldn't keep, and then all the teachings of the Scriptures that were upon him. He [had been] so excited to become a monk because then he would be able to study the Bible. He wanted to learn about the Word of God. Yet, as he studied the Word of God, it just became a greater burden because he saw how much of a sinner he was, and how far he fell short of God's glory. What was Luther to do? He knew that God would punish him because of his sin, and he knew that he couldn't get perfect enough to please God. He, like many other people, was in this weird place, kind of a moth-to-the-flame, fatal-attraction type thing where you just want to run from God, but you know you can't escape God. It's like trying to escape from a giant, you know? You don't want him to crush you, and yet you know you can't outrun him. You know God is going to crush you, and yet you know you can't outrun Him. This created in Martin this terror. He couldn't escape, and yet he knew he needed to go to God, and yet God was the one who was going to judge him. He didn't know what to do. He was beside himself.

One day, while studying the book of Romans, Luther came across a familiar verse, a very troubling verse, a verse he knew well, that just bothered him to no end. He came to Romans 1:17, which is part of the two theme verses of Romans, where it says: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.'" He knew that this was the theme verse, and when

he looked at that verse, this is what he saw: because of his upbringing, because of the Roman Catholic system, because it was a works-oriented system, what he saw in that [verse] is that God is a righteous God who demands perfect righteousness from His creatures or He will judge them. That's what he saw. He looked at that, and he thought, "The righteousness of God is so scary because God is perfect and I am not." Luther could not give God what he knew God demanded. One day, [Luther] was pondering this text, looking at it, thinking about it, and this is what Luther wrote:

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: "The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The just person lives by faith.'"

I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e., that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The just person lives by faith."

All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, “the justice of God,” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.²

What Luther experienced is what every true believer experiences. There is this point in his life when [the believer] realizes, “Man, I can’t get right before God. I’m better than the axe murderer, but I’m not as good as God. I may be better than other people, but I’m nowhere close to infinitely holy. God’s going to judge me. What am I going to do?” This is when Luther finally realized that salvation was not by works with a little grace added for help, it was by grace alone.

I’ve talked to people at different times. Just recently I talked to somebody. He came up to me after the service, and was in great torment of soul, burdened with his sin, [and] unable to get free. [He said], “I just can’t quit sinning. I’m trying to please God, I’m trying to do what’s right, I’m trying...” and what he was thinking, and what was going through his mind was, “I’ve got to make God like me. I’ve got to become a friend of God. I’ve got to do whatever I need to do to stop being the way that I am so God will look at me, and say, ‘You are a good person; therefore, you can come to heaven.’” This person was just tormented. Maybe that is you. Maybe you are burdened right now, and you feel that same way. Well, I have good news for you. It is the very good news that finally sunk into Luther’s heart some 500 years ago. It is [the] Reformation cry that *salvation is by grace alone*.

In order to explain this [concept], I would like to turn your attention to Romans 1. I’m just going to survey these chapters. I want you to know [that] the whole book of Romans, especially these first chapters, [is] so theologically dense [that] it takes huge self-control to do this. I want you to pray for me because every little part in here is just crammed full of series of sermons. I don’t know if I’m ever going to preach through Romans. I

²Available from:

<http://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/tower.txt>

don't think I ever could preach through Romans. It just seems like we'd be there forever. You think I'm going slow[ly] through Luke? [In] Romans we'd be bogged down into eternity. But I'm going to just give you a survey of what's happening here leading up to our passage. I want you to see in your minds the flow of the passage so that you can understand how great these couple little verses are [that] we're going to look at.

First, Paul gives his typical greeting in [Romans 1:]1–7: “I, Paul, the apostle of Christ Jesus,” etc., and then in [Romans 1:]9–15, he says he serves God by preaching the gospel. He has been called by God to preach the gospel, and he is eager to preach the gospel to [those] who are in Rome, and to everyone else as well. Then in [Romans 1:]16–17, he gives the theme verses. We read one of them—verse 17—already. [In Romans 1:]16, Paul says: “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,” and then the verse we just read about [says], “in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” He has this theme that he sets down in the very beginning. Paul is a preacher of the gospel that “is the power of God for everyone who believes.”

Where would you, if you were going to share the gospel, start? Where Paul starts is, “OK, first I need to convince you why you need to be saved. Let me convince you why you need to be saved.” And so, from [Romans 1:]18 all the way through to [Romans] 3:20, Paul goes to great lengths to explain that everybody is a sinner. He first describes generally how men are sinners, that God reveals Himself to men through the gospel message, [and] that they have fallen short of His glory. This is the first thing you need to understand: You are a sinner and that's why you need [to be] saved. So, he says, “God has revealed Himself to men through creation, through His law written in their hearts, through conscience, through His Word, and men take that truth and they suppress it in unrighteousness. Therefore, God, as a form of judgment, gives them over to greater degrees of sin as they keep rejecting His truth.” So that's what he says in [Romans 1:]18–32.

Then in [Romans] 2:1–16, he’s thinking in his mind, “OK, who are the people who are going to read this letter, and who are the people who are going to have objections?” He [thinks], “There [are] going to be those moral people there, those people who say, ‘Yeah, I’m a pretty good person. I’ve never robbed a bank, I’ve never killed anybody, I’ve never committed adultery. I’m a pretty good person.’” And so, Paul, then, explains in the first part of [Romans] 2 that, “Listen, you moralists, you may be better than some other people, but you’re not as good as God. You too will be judged for your sin because the wrath of God is revealed against all sin, and you have sinned—maybe not as much as others, maybe not as grievously as others, but you’re still deserving [of] the judgment of God.” Then he thinks, “You know what? There are going to be some Jews who are going to be reading this, and they’re going to be thinking to themselves, ‘You know, I’m a pretty good person. I’m a Jew, and I’m of the children of Abraham, of the chosen nation, we have the prophets, we have the Law. Of course I’m going to heaven.’” And he [says], “I just want you to know, if you’re a Jew, that doesn’t make certain your salvation. It only makes you more accountable and probably a greater sinner because you have [received] more revelation and yet you still sin.”

Then he just decides to make [it] crystal clear that the entire world is guilty in [Romans] 3:1–8. In order to establish this thing, he’s going to bring it to an end. He’s going to say, “OK, here’s my final statement on ‘everybody’s a sinner and deserving judgment,’” and this is what he says. He doesn’t even give the words himself, he just quotes a whole bunch of Scriptures. He’s not only an apostle who speaks with authority, he’s not only an apostle who is writing an inspired letter, he quotes other inspired texts so that he has double-inspired authority as he lays this down.

This is what he says in Romans 3:9–20: “What then? Are we,” the Jews, “better than they?” the Gentiles. He says, “Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written,” now, this is where he begins to quote pieces of the Old Testament, so he is reminding them that this is what God says about the nature, the state, of all

mankind. He says: "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS." Now, if he were to just say that, that's pretty good. That's pretty inclusive: "none righteous," right? "None righteous"—that means "none" in the Greek. But that's not all that he says:

"There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving," the poison of asps is under their lips"; "whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness"; "their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. [Romans 3:10–20]

He says, "Listen, I don't care who you are, this is [describing] you. There is no amount of law-keeping that can make you justified in [God's] sight. The Law only makes you aware that you're a sinner." That's what he says.

That's how he starts out his book. It's kind of on a downer note, but the good thing is [that] he establishes [that] all men are sinners for the purpose of realizing [that] all people need salvation [and] so that he can then tell them how to get saved, which is the good part. We live in a day and age [in which] a lot of people think, "God is loving. God is kind. God is compassionate." He is; let's not deny that. [People think], "God's going to forgive me," [and] when they think about that, they think [that] God is

those things—[loving, kind, compassionate, forgiving]—to the exclusion of His justice. That is, [they think that] God somehow is able to forgive us, and love us, and set aside His justice. No. He is infinitely just, which means [that] every sin that is ever committed by anyone at any time will demand full satisfaction from God. Yes, He’s loving. Yes, He’s compassionate. Yes, He forgives people. However, He maintains His infinite justice.

You [may] think, “Well, how does that work?” We’re getting there. Let’s see the solution. I’m going to read Romans 3:21–26, and we’re going to take two little verses out of the middle of this section. Follow along as I read. [What is] God’s solution to man’s problem, [which is that] everybody is a sinner, no one can be justified by keeping the Law? [Look at Romans 3:]21 and following:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [a word that means “a sacrifice that satisfies the wrath of God”] in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

I want to comment on those verses so much—especially that last part. It just draws me to explain everything, but I can’t because then I wouldn’t be able to explain verses 23–24. Sorry. From [Romans 3:]23–24, I want to give you two truths that are universal, that we all need to understand for two reasons: 1) so you can know how somebody who is a sinner can be right

before a holy God; and 2) so you can look at your own life and see if you have applied this to your life, if you have experienced this in your life, if you have received the one way that you can be right with a holy God.

[The] first [truth is]: Everyone is a sinner. We've already seen it. [Romans 3:]23 is a summary of that whole section [in Romans] 1:18–3:20, where he says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Now, when you say "sin," what do you mean by that? [Is] Paul saying that you've committed one of the seven deadly sins? If you let Hollywood [or] the media train you in your theology, you might think there are only seven deadly sins. [But no,] every sin is deadly, not just seven [of them]. OK? Remember that. The Greek word for "sin" is actually an archery term that means "to miss the mark." It's like there's a little bulls-eye, and you try and shoot it with the arrow, and if you miss the bulls-eye, you have "sinned," you have "missed the mark," [which] is what the term means.

Imagine this. Let's say we give you a bow, we set a target out there at thirty yards, and there is a bulls-eye on that target a little bit smaller than a small pea. We're talking a little, tiny red dot. That's the bulls-eye. That's the perfect dot of God's will. That dot is a little bit smaller than the diameter of the shaft of the arrows that you're shooting, so if you were to hit that dot dead center, the arrow would punch through the paper and you couldn't see any red. You would have a perfect strike, a perfect bulls-eye. That's all God wants. Now, this is the problem: Every time you think, you shoot an arrow. Think of how many thoughts you have every day. Every time you do anything, you shoot an arrow. So, all day long, [you're shooting arrows at that target]. They're just going at the target, and any time you miss that tiny, little red dot, even if you hit it and hit it really well but there's just a little bit of red showing on the side, you've sinned. You've missed the mark of God's holy perfection. That's what sin is. Anything you do in thought or deed that deviates any degree from [a] perfect bulls-eye is to sin. You've missed the mark.

Maybe once every ten years you actually strike the bulls-eye, but what about all the time in between? You might think to yourself, "Well, Jack,

come on. Are you kidding me? We could never be that perfect.” That is the whole point. If you are thinking that, [then] that is the whole point. That is exactly what you should think. That’s what Paul wants to bring us to. That’s what God wants us to arrive at: We could never hit the mark that perfectly. No one can do that.

Bishop Moule described it with these words:

The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of God’s glory, but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of the mine, and you are at the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they.”³

We can look at other people, and say, “Well, I’m better than you,” but we aren’t to be comparing ourselves with other people; we’re to be comparing ourselves with who[m]? God. See, when we look at other people, we can justify our own righteousness by finding somebody worse, but when we look at God, we’re way down. We’re so far from infinitely perfect like God is. That’s why we, every one of us, need salvation. This is why Martin Luther struggled so inside as a young man. He could not figure out being a sinner, even though, try as he might, he kept missing the perfect dot of God’s will. He knew it, he knew it in his heart [that] though he impressed other people, he knew God knew [his sins], and therefore he was a very miserable person.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Well, Jack, I’m not like one of those ritualistic people. I’m not one of those people who does all [this] genuflecting, and incense, and rosaries, and whatever. I don’t have those rituals that I’m doing. I’m a pretty good person. I come to church, I read my Bible, I go to Bible study and small group. I attend here, I serve here, I do this, I do that.” You know what? Those things that you do can be just like the rituals

³John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 109.

that Martin Luther observed in the Roman Catholic Church. Do you realize that?

If you were to ask tormented Martin Luther, before he came to the Lord, “Do you believe in Jesus?” he would say, “Yes.”

“Do you believe that Jesus died on the cross for sins?”

“Yes.”

“That He was buried?”

“Yes.”

“That He rose again on the third day?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe He was the Son of God?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think He was born of a virgin?”

“Yes.”

“Well, why are you tormented?” Well, just knowing those facts doesn’t save you. You see, Martin Luther grew up in a system [in which] he was told those facts, and then told to do the sacraments, and to keep doing the sacraments, and [that] if he kept doing the sacraments that those sacraments, those good deeds of his, at the end might save him if he was faithful to the very end to keep doing them and he didn’t die with an unconfessed mortal sin. Then, he would go to Purgatory, and he would suffer in Purgatory to cleanse himself of those sins that he committed so that he could go up to heaven maybe millions of years later. That’s a miserable place to be. But it’s equally miserable to grow up in a Bible church, know the truth, know the facts, just like Luther knew. Yeah, you’re not [burning] incense, genuflecting, [or using] holy water. But what you are doing is you’re [saying], “Well, I go to church. I read my Bible. I go to small group. I do this.” When somebody talks to you about being saved, your mind goes to all these things that you do, and you know that’s why you’re saved, right? Because [you] do these things. If that’s you, you’re not saved, just like Martin Luther wasn’t saved, because your mind doesn’t understand [that] you’re not saved by good works. Good works don’t save you.

Whether you're involved in some sort of high-church denomination, or whether you're in a Bible church, you can still have rituals [to which] you cling. So what do you do? How do you get right with God? This brings us to our second [truth]: You are justified by grace. You [may wonder], "What is 'justification'? What is that term?" I know a lot of you aren't theologians. You probably don't sit around and read systematic theologies. I'm sure that when you go to public school, or whatever, they don't sit you down, and say, "Here, read this systematic theology." We don't do that stuff. It's not something that even a lot of people who are Christians do. "Justification" is a term that we hear, [and we] usually use [it] like this: "Oh, so-and-so is trying to justify himself."

Your mom comes up to you, and says, "Hey, [why isn't] your room clean?"

"Well..." and then in order to justify yourself you blame your sister. OK? Or, you say, "Well, I had homework to do," or, "My friend called me," or "I was texting." (Texting is the excuse for everything these days.) There's something that you use to try and justify your innocence, right?

Well, justification is kind of like that, but it's when you are right before God, when you are innocent before God. That's what justification is. "Justification" is actually a legal term. The Greek term was used in a legal sense to declare somebody to be right or just. Let's say you went to a trial, and all of the witnesses came, and at the very end, you were found innocent. You would be justified, declared to be right. OK? Well, we know we aren't right. We've just established that. We know that we can't be right before a holy God, though we can be better than other people. Yet the Bible makes it clear that we need to be just before God. So, how does this work? Well, it works because of Jesus, because of what Jesus came to do, because He lived a perfect life and He willingly offered Himself up on the cross to die for our sins on the cross, to pay the penalty that we deserve, so [that] we could go free.

As a matter of fact, later on in Romans 4:5, [Paul] tells us that God justifies the ungodly. [You may be] sitting there, thinking, "So what?" [That's]

probably because you don't read your Bible enough because the Bible says in multiple other places that [it's] bad to justify the ungodly. I'm just going to give you one verse [that says this]. Proverbs 17:15 [says]: "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD." Think about that. Paul says [that] God justifies the ungodly, the wicked, the unrighteous, and the Bible says that [doing so] is an abomination to the Lord. Is the Lord doing sin? How does that work? Do you ever wonder about that? You know, a lot of people come, and [say to me], "Man, I wish I could know the Bible like you do." I just want you to know [that more knowledge] just creates more problems. Whenever we have question and answer time, I'm so glad you don't know all the problems that I have questions about. It's [as though] the more you know the more you know you don't know. Pretty soon, you just are hoping that nobody knows what you don't know so they don't ask you.

John Stott, commenting on this little paradox [of God justifying the unjust], says this:

Then how on earth can Paul affirm that God does what he forbids others to do: that he does what he says he will himself never do; that he does it habitually, and that he even designates himself, "the God who justifies the wicked" or (we might say) "who 'righteousses' the unrighteous?"⁴

I mean, He makes righteous the unrighteous. [Stott continues]:

It is preposterous! How can the righteous God act unrighteously, and so overthrow the moral order, turning it upside down? It is unbelievable! Or rather it would be, if it were not for the cross of Christ. Without the cross the justification of the unjust would be unjustified, immoral, and therefore impossible.

⁴Ibid., n.p.

The only reason God “justifies the wicked” ([Romans] 4:5) is that “Christ died for the wicked” ([Romans] 5:6). Because he shed his blood ([Romans] 3:25) in sacrificial death for us sinners, God is able justly to justify the unjust.⁵

That’s how it works. It’s not that God just says, “You’re wicked, and even though I’m infinitely just, I’m just going to not exercise My justice in this case and I’m going to let you go free.” No. “I’m just going to forgive you.” No. “I’m just going to give you grace.” No. [He says instead], “You are a sinner, you deserve to be punished, and so what I’m going to do is I’m going to satisfy My justice and My wrath on someone else instead of you, as a substitute for you, in place of you.”

In 1515, Martin Luther was Dr. Martin Luther, professor at Wittenberg. He would teach his students through books of the Bible. At that time they didn’t have semesters and summer break, so when you started a book, you just kept lecturing and lecturing until you finished it up. You took a little break, and then you would start on [the] next topic. He loved the Scriptures, and so he was teaching through the Scriptures, and he lectured through the entire book of Romans. [He] actually created a little commentary on the book of Romans. This was early in his teaching career, so his theology hadn’t developed much. The problem is [that] his lecture notes on the book of Romans were lost. [You’re probably thinking], “Luther’s notes on Romans were lost? Oh, bummer.”

For a couple hundred years, no one had a copy of them, until they were found in the most unlikely of places. Somebody found a copy of Luther’s lecture notes on the book of Romans in the Vatican library in Rome—the Roman Catholic Church vault of sacred Scripture. Apparently, this copy was in the library of Heidelberg, and emperor Maximilian I gave it as a gift to Pope Gregory XV, and [the pope] put it in the [Vatican] library. Who would want to read it? It’s kind of like the antithesis of what [the Roman Catholic Church] believed. Not long after that, the very original manuscript,

⁵Ibid., n.p.

the one that Luther had in his hands and taught from in class was found in the Prussian State Library in Berlin, so we have [that] copy.

Luther, commenting on our text—Romans 3:24—wrote these succinct thoughts:

God does not justify us freely by his grace in such a way that He did not demand any atonement to be made for our sins, for He gave Jesus Christ into death for us, in order that He might atone for our sins. So now He justifies freely by His grace those who have been redeemed by His Son.

That's all he wrote on this first major verse in the book of Romans that teaches us about justification by grace alone. But he had it right. Jesus is the narrow door [see Luke 13:24], the narrow way [see Matthew 7:13–14].

Look at [Romans 3]:24. Paul explains how someone gets justified. Yeah, we all “fall short of the glory of God,” we're all sinners. He says this in verse 24: “Being justified as a gift,” and just stop there. What is a gift? A gift is something somebody gives to you by grace, something you don't earn, something you don't deserve. [It would be a] bummer [if] somebody gave you a really nice gift, and then said, “Here's the bill.” It would be fun to give gifts like that, wouldn't it? It's like, “Let's go buy him a new Ferrari and then we'll give it to him, he'll be happy, and then we'll give him the bill, and say, ‘You owe us.’” No, gifts are given graciously. When somebody comes for your birthday and he gives you a gift, you don't deserve that gift. It's not something you've earned or worked for, it's just given by grace.

Not only that, this term, when [Paul] says, “being justified,” is a passive tense verb, which means that you receive from God justification. I know a lot of you probably aren't into grammar, but let me just give you a little grammar lesson here. There's an active tense, [in which] the subject is the doer of the action[as in the sentence] “The boy hits the ball.” Then there's the passive tense, [in which] the boy is hit *by* the ball. This is passive. You aren't grabbing justification, you aren't doing justification, justification hits you from God. You're struck with God's justification.

The term “gift” is interesting. Some translations translate [that word as] “freely.” The word means “without charge, without price, without cause, without paying for it.” So, when he says, “You’re struck with justification without anything you do,” that’s why it’s translated in the New American Standard [version] as a “gift,” something that’s free. That is, you don’t do anything for it, which means what? It’s by grace.

Guess what? That’s what Paul says. If you look at that [first part of the verse, it says]: “Being justified as a gift,” what? “By His grace.” What is grace? Grace is the kindness of God given to sinners that they don’t deserve, that they haven’t earned. You can’t demand grace. Grace isn’t something [about which] you can say, “Well, if God saved so-and-so, then He needs to save me.” No, salvation is by grace, and since it is by grace, you don’t deserve it. You can’t say, “It’s not fair.” If you want fair, you want justice and only justice. If you want grace, then you want Jesus to satisfy God’s justice, and then you want what you don’t deserve.

Let’s just say that you got a new car, a Ferrari Enzo, or a Bugatti, or something [else] really fast. You want to test it out, so you’re driving 100 mph down a 30 mph street. All of a sudden you see [in your rearview mirror] the police officers way back there trying to keep up. You realize, “They’re after me. I should probably slow down.” So you slow down, and they come up [behind you]. The guy’s got his gun in his holster, and he comes over to your car, and says, “Hey, do you know how fast you were going?”

“Yes, Officer, I was going 100 mph. Do you like my new car?”

He says, “You know what? I’m going to have to give you something.” So, he says, “Here are four free passes, all expenses paid, to Disneyland for the weekend.”

You take them from him, and you’re thinking, “What is this? Is this Candid Camera? What is this that he’s giving me this kind gift, though I broke the law?” It kind of bothers you, and so you say, “You know, Officer, I don’t mean to be ungrateful or anything, but don’t you take a vow as an officer? Don’t you vow to uphold the law? Didn’t I break the law? Don’t I

deserve a ticket and maybe [to] go to jail if I go 100 [mph] on a [30] mph [road]? What's going on here?"

He says, "Well, you know what? If it wasn't for the person who volunteered to pay the penalty for what you just did, you'd be handcuffed and on your way to jail now. But, since somebody else has volunteered to pay the penalty, and somebody else will serve your jail time for you, therefore the justice of our system is satisfied, so you go free. You not only get to go free, but you get these free passes to Disneyland."

That's kind of what's happening in salvation, but to a greater degree because you have, by your sin, earned a ticket to hell. You deserve to be punished in hell forever and ever. So, along comes Jesus, and voluntarily, as a Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [see John 1:29], is on the cross, and God takes all the sin of the world and dumps it on Him, pours out His wrath on Him so that Jesus, then, suffers the death that you should have died. It is only by His death that [God is] satisfied. God didn't set aside His justice, [it] was satisfied on Jesus for your sin.

That's why, if you look at the end of [Romans 3:]²⁴, Paul goes on to say, "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." This term "redeemed" was used in the marketplaces at the time. For instance, if you were a slave at that time, it was bad because you'd get bought and sold, and bought and sold. You were like cattle, [or a] horse, or whatever. If you wanted to be set free as a slave, you would need somebody to purchase you and then set you free, to redeem you from your slavery, and then to set you free. When we're born into this world, we're sinners. Any parent knows that he doesn't have to teach his child to kick while he's getting his diaper changed. [Children] just know how to do it at a young age. They know [the word] "no," as soon as they know how to speak. You don't say, "Say 'no' whenever I tell you to do something," they just know automatically.

As you grow up, you sin, you sin, you sin, you sin. And so, what needs to happen is, because you're enslaved to sin, and you're enslaved to Satan, and because you've earned yourself a ticket to hell and God's justice must be satisfied on you, there is only one way to escape, and that is if some

kind person, some gracious person, not because of anything you have done, but because of his grace, would voluntarily take the hit for you, suffer the penalty for you, in your place, as a substitute. That's exactly what Jesus did. He came to earth, He lived this perfect life, and then He offered Himself up as a sacrifice for sins on the cross so that anybody, through faith in [Him], by God's grace alone, could receive the free gift of eternal life.

If you study the life of Paul, the guy was like Martin Luther. He grew up the Pharisee of Pharisees. Remember how he describes himself? "Pharisee of Pharisees, [circumcised] on the eighth day, tribe of Benjamin" [see Philippians 3:1–8]. He says, "As far as righteousness which can be found in the Law, [I was] blameless. [I was] disciplined by Gamaliel," one of the most famous rabbis of all time [see Acts 22:3]. He says, "I've got it all." Then he says, "But all these things I count as loss," and that's a really kind word. A lot of times, in English Bibles, they kind of gloss over things. [The word is] really "manure," and maybe a worse term than that. "I count all my good deeds as manure." Then he says this [in] Philippians 3:[9]: "And may be found in Him," that is, Jesus, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith."

That's what Luther discovered in his study, and that's what everybody who gets to heaven discovers at a point in life, by grace. They realize, "You mean to tell me [that] it's not a matter of me being good, being better than the average person, doing certain rituals or certain fundamental Bible church activities, or anything of those things? It's not a matter of what I do?" You're getting it. "It's a matter of what Christ did." You've got it. "And that by merely placing my faith in Christ and what He did, and that alone, I will be saved by God's unmerited, undeserved favor, alone?" That's it. That's salvation by grace alone. That's what the Scriptures teach.

If you're out there, and you're [thinking], "I don't know about this Christianity thing. I don't know. I don't know if I'm a Christian. I thought I was a Christian before I came here, but I'm realizing [that] maybe I'm trusting in my works. Maybe I'm trusting in my good deeds and my Bible

friends, [or] affiliations, [or] whatever.” Well, you can remedy that right now, and it’s not by being good, by crawling on your knees, [or] by doing a bunch of repetitious prayers. It’s by, right now, placing your faith in the grace of God given to us in Christ, who died on the cross for our sins, was buried, and resurrected for our justification. If you do that, you will be born again by God, justified by God, declared to be righteous in His sight based off of what Jesus did, not you. That is one of the great Reformation cries. There [are] four more to come. Let’s pray.

Father, we thank You so much for Your goodness to us. We thank You for the Reformation and those precious truths that were passed down from the apostles to others, like Augustine, and [from] Augustine to people like Luther, [and from] Luther to people like us. Father, if there [are people] here who have been deceived and have all the facts of the gospel in their heads, but, Father, have never given their lives to Christ and believed by faith and trusted in Jesus, I pray that they would do that now. Help them to find that joy, that peace with You that surpasses all understanding [see Philippians 4:7]. Open their minds and help them to see Jesus, the One who did it all because we cannot do it for ourselves, and [that] by merely grabbing hold of Jesus by faith they would be changed. For the rest of us, may we leave here rejoicing and praising You, and may we be looking for opportunities to share the gospel with others who need to know that salvation is by grace alone. We pray this in Christ’s name, Amen.

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