

Reformation Theology: Sola Gratia

July 9, 2017 - Rev. Brian Hand

Definition: Our salvation is not earned in any part; it is the free gift of God's grace from start to finish.

1. The basis for salvation is that it is a free gift
 2. The source of salvation is God and God alone.
 3. The scope of salvation is gracious from start to finish.
- A. Gospel grace: *not merely unmerited favor, but demerited favor (i.e., in spite of our sin).*

Implications

1. God does not owe salvation to anyone-nor does he owe anyone anything else!
 - a. God's decision to save anyone at all is absolutely free and gracious.
 - b. God would not be unjust if he were to save no one.
 - c. God is not unjust because he allows that some people never hear the gospel.
2. Salvation cannot be earned or merited by anyone-not even in part
3. Salvation is not in any respect a human work or a natural work.
 - a. Salvation does not involve humans co-operating with God.
 - b. Salvation is a supernatural work from start to finish. *i.e. not moral self improvement (liberal theology) or learning to live as Christ lived.*
4. We should put no trust in our own works or efforts to secure our salvation.
5. There is no need for anyone to supplement the work of Christ for their salvation.
6. All moral efforts of fallen human beings are polluted by sin and unacceptable to God.
7. There are not good people going to heaven-only bad people! 1. *This is different from saying there are no good people IN heaven; there are only good people IN heaven but only bad people GOING to heaven.*

8. All benefits in this life come from divine grace ('common' grace or 'special' grace).

Scriptural Support:

1. Psalm 51 no hint of personal moral self transformation or personal absolution for sin. David casts himself on God's mercy. External religious works cannot be the solution
2. Luke 15:11-32 Prodigal son
3. Romans 3:9-12, 20-24 No one is righteous, all have sinned and fall short and are justified by his grace as a gift.
4. Romans 4:4-5 if it is by works salvation would be our due
5. Romans 6:23 Wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
6. Galatians 2:21 1.If justification were through the law (works) then Christ died for nothing.

Summary Argument/ Theological Basis:

1. We are fallen in sin and all our moral efforts are tainted by sin.
2. Therefore, we cannot earn God's favor and eternal life by our moral efforts.
3. Therefore, we can obtain God's favor and eternal life only by divine grace.

Discussion Questions:

A. Is *Sola Gratia* necessary to the gospel? (Explain your answer!)

Yes, to add anything to the gospel of Salvation by grace is to dishonor Christ.

B. If the Bible is so clear that salvation is by grace alone, how could this doctrine ever have been obscured or compromised?

Our own pride can't accept that there is nothing we must do to earn it. We assume that the good things come to those who work for it. We wish to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others "I'm not as bad as that guy"

C. If grace is the antithesis of human effort, how could Peter exhort his readers to "grow in the grace...of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18)

Although salvation is by grace alone it does not mean we are passive in the Christian life. We don't get all of the grace at the first point in our Christian life (Sanctification) we must actively pursue the activity of growing in grace, but when we do it is not meritorious work, these actions are themselves sustained by grace.

Objections:

A. Objection 1: "If good works don't count for anything, it doesn't matter how we live."

(Anitnomianism) It is not that the way we live doesn't count for anything, they do count, but they do not merit salvation. They don't count to earn salvation, yet they are still necessary as the necessary evidence of saving faith. These good works have been prepared for us from the foundation of the world. But they do not form a ground for God's favor. Romans 6, Ephesians 2:10

B. Objection 2: "It's morally repugnant to suggest that a good man like Mahatma Gandhi didn't go to heaven because he wasn't a Christian, but a serial killer on death row could go to heaven just by trusting in Jesus!"

This makes the standard of salvation fall somewhere on a continuum of fallen human beings, but the standard is the perfection of Christ. The reason he doesn't go to heaven is not because he wasn't a Christian but because he was a sinner, however

“good” he may have been. Ultimately we don’t want to remove the scandalous nature of the gospel, it is shocking. The basic problem is that this assumption underestimates the offense of sin. It is morally repugnant that a sinner like Gandhi could be in the presence of a holy God.

C. Objection 3: “Roman Catholics also believe that salvation is entirely gracious.”

i.e. that this is not a distinctive Reformed doctrine. There is some level of truth in this. It is not exactly true to say that Protestants believe in salvation by grace and Catholics believe in salvation by works. They will say that we need God’s grace at every point from first to last. However, they have a different understanding of how grace functions. According to the Catechism, grace is the help that God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adoptive sons. It is the help God gives us so that we can merit our salvation by good works. “We can have merit in God’s sight only because of God’s free plan to associate man with the work of his grace. Merit is to be ascribed in the first place to the grace of God and secondly to man’s collaboration, man’s merit is due to God. No one can merit initial grace. Moved by the Holy spirit we can merit for ourselves and others all the graces needed to attain eternal life and necessary temporal goods” God’s grace helps us to merit more grace. Grace leads to merit leads to grace leads to merit. In Paul’s writing grace and merit are antithetical. RC affirms grace alone but then their position becomes incoherent as they add to grace. In this case God does not get all the glory, if we cooperate then we have grounds to boast. This would also diminish the value of Christ’s sacrifice in that he didn’t actually save anyone, but made it possible that we might be saved if we cooperate.

D. Objection 4: “Philippians 2:12 says that we should work out our own salvation.”

Easily dealt with, read verse 13, “for it is God who works in us...”

Importance to the Christian Life

- A. *Sola Gratia* gives glory to God as the sole author of our salvation. There is no basis whatsoever for our boasting. The only thing we contribute is our sin from which we are saved.
- B. *Sola Gratia* frees us from the crushing burden of futile efforts to earn God’s favor. “Come to me all who are weary...” Contrasting his yoke with the legalism of the Pharisees. Rest in him by grace rather than the burden of the law and the requirement to fulfill it by your own efforts

- C. *Sola Gratia* cultivates an attitude of gratitude-continual, unqualified thankfulness to God.
- D. *Sola Gratia* cultivates an attitude of humility-both toward God and toward others.
Grace is antithetical to pride and boasting
- E. *Sola Gratia* cultivates an attitude of grace and mercy toward others (Matthew 18:21-35)
parable of the unforgiving servant. Any debts owed to us are nothing compared to our debt to God and so any mercy we show is nothing compared to any mercy we receive.
- F. *Sola Gratia* points us to the "means of grace" as we strive for holiness.
We are not sanctified by merit anymore than we are justified by our merit. We are active, but we are encouraged to pursue the means of grace (sacraments, the Scripture and prayer)
- G. *Sola Gratia* guards us against both legalism and license (Romans 10:3-4; 6:14-15).

Citation: Much of this material comes from lectures given by Dr. James Anderson, RTS Global Campus