

**“Sola Gratia”**  
**Matthew 15:29-39**  
**October 7, 2018**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The third *sola*, and the one featured in today’s passage, is about the grace of God. We believe in salvation by God’s grace alone, with grace defined as God’s unmerited favor. God doesn’t wait until we deserve his blessings to give them, but gives them even though we don’t deserve them. The grace of God is an affront to human pride, which wants to think that we must do something to make ourselves worthy of God. The hymn *Come, Ye Sinners* expresses it well when it says, “If you tarry ‘til you’re better, you will never come at all.” Yet that’s precisely what human pride wants to do. We want to clean ourselves up to be worthy of God. We have a hard time simply receiving from God’s abundant grace.

I had an experience of this after I broke both my wrists about 20 years ago and had to be fed by others for about three weeks. It is humbling to be in a place of such dependence, a place where all you can do is receive the undeserved help of others. It is the same with God’s grace. Though it is humbling to receive it, once we do, everything changes. That’s what this story is all about.

**I. The Universal Nature of Grace**

The grace of God comes both to Jews and Gentiles. Matthew tells us that Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, but he doesn’t tell us which side of the sea. The western side of the Sea was largely Jewish while the eastern side was Gentile. Though it is not clear to modern readers of the text, it would have been quite clear to Matthew’s original Jewish readers that Jesus was among Gentiles here. It’s evident from the language he chooses in verse 31 when he reports, **“And they glorified the God of Israel.”** Jewish people would not refer to God as “the God of Israel.” Even if Matthew is a little subtle about this, Mark’s Gospel is not, naming the route of Jesus’ travels and specifying that he was “in the region of the Decapolis” (Mark 7:31). This meant he was on the eastern, Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus has just healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman, a Gentile. He did so after she said to him that even the household pets get to eat the crumbs from the table. Jesus makes it clear by his actions here that these crumbs do not mean any restricted blessing for Gentiles. He sits on the mountain and the Gentiles come to him by the thousands, and he heals them. This was not the kind of Messiah first century Jews were looking for. They were expecting a

Messiah who would conquer Gentiles, not heal them. They were expecting a Messiah who would not only restore the ancient Davidic kingdom, but expand it to the whole world, a Jewish world. Gentiles would have a place in this kingdom, but it would be subservient to Jews. But here is this Messiah doing the same thing for Gentiles as he did for Jews, healing them and feeding them. And these Gentiles were idolaters. They were ignorant of the Law of Moses and made no effort to keep God's holy law. There was no reason by birth or by behavior that these Gentiles should have received these gifts from Jesus. But there was a reason. They received them by God's grace, his undeserved favor.

Matthew tells us that Jesus **“went up on the mountain and sat down there”** (v. 29). Why does he choose to report that detail? Part of it, undoubtedly, is the simple fact that it happened just that way. But there are many details that happened that he doesn't report. It's not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Matthew speaks of Jesus' ministry on a mountain. We remember, for example, his great sermon on the mountain (Matthew 5-7). Mountains were thought to be places where heaven and earth met. That's why Israel's temple was built on a mountain called Mt. Zion. The implication is clear: Jesus is replacing Zion as the center of God's presence on the earth. And unlike Mt. Zion, this new temple makes no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

Jesus is gracious not just to Gentiles here, but also to Jews. It is true that the Jews of Jesus' day had been given many advantages. They had the benefit of the Old Testament and of God's long history with his people. But it is also true that it was, more often than not, a very troubled history because of the unbelief of the Jewish people. The disciples' behavior in the feeding of the four thousand provides yet another example of Jewish unbelief.

Hopefully, this story of the feeding sounds familiar to you, because in just the previous chapter Matthew tells of a feeding of 5000. This has led some commentators to say that Matthew is describing the same event twice. One commentator bases that conclusion on what he considers to be the inconceivability of the disciples' forgetfulness. He says, “The stupid repetition of the question is psychologically impossible!” The question he is referring to is the one recorded in verse 33: **“Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?”** That question was asked after Jesus announces his intention to feed this crowd before they depart. They had been with him for three days already, and almost all the food they brought with them has been eaten. Jesus, filled with compassion, fears that they might faint on the long walk back to their homes without adequate food.

Teachers like to say that there are no stupid questions. I think we need to make an exception to that statement with this question from the disciples. How could they forget so soon that when Jesus was with them no one was going to leave hungry, no matter where they were? Perhaps there is even some sarcasm

in the question, as if they think Jesus has lost touch with reality. In truth, they had lost touch with reality because of their extreme amnesia, forgetting Jesus' past provision. Don't we do the same? Don't we too often exhibit a vast capacity for unbelief? As soon as God faithfully delivers us from one trial, we respond to the next one with fear and anxiety. All of us stand in need of the grace of God because all of us are undeserving.

Let me mention one application of this before moving on. We must get rid of all notions about our deserving something good from God. Someone I know who lives out of town is frequently saying about others when something good comes to them, "He deserves that." Such a response is a practical denial of the grace of God. The truth is that we do deserve something from God, and it's his judgment. What we do not deserve is his favor. But by the grace of God in the substitutionary death of Jesus, we get the favor we don't deserve and Jesus gets the judgment we do deserve. That's the grace of God. It comes to all who will humble themselves and confess their undeserving nature and count instead on Jesus' grace.

## II. The Gifts of Grace

Imagine yourself afflicted with one of these diseases it is reported that Jesus healed. Four are mentioned, though it is likely that these are samples of the kinds of maladies healed by Jesus. But the ones mentioned are significant because all of them cut us off from the kind of life God intended for us and the kind of life Jesus will restore. The lame and the crippled are both disabilities of immobility. Instead of being able to help and serve others, they must be helped by others. Since it is part of our essence as humans to serve others rather than have others serve us, this is a dehumanizing disability. The same is true for the blind, who must be led around by others and provided for by others in many ways. The list of things the blind can do for others is a very short list. The last category mentioned is the mute, a disability that cuts one off from community. By his grace, Jesus restores us to true humanity, and the most significant feature of being truly human is to praise God, which is what happens on this day. **"They glorified the God of Israel."**

Another gift of God's grace is his compassion. Jesus said, **"I have compassion on the crowd"** (v. 32). We've encountered this word before, because it is often used to describe one of Jesus' emotions. It means that he feels the needs of these people in his gut. I think we tend to think of many of Jesus' miracles as being done in something of an assembly line fashion, almost robotically. But Jesus is more parent than robot, having a heart that goes out to those to whom he acts with grace.

And then he feeds the crowds. He is a one-man hospital and a one-man kitchen. Once again, they all ate and were satisfied. Once again, there were

leftovers, indicating that everyone had as much as they wanted. No one goes hungry when Jesus is around. It should be said that there is an “already-not yet” quality to these things. That is, the kingdom that Jesus brings, the one where all diseases are healed and all hunger banished is not yet here in full. Christians do in fact get sick and die from disease. There are Christians who are suffering from chronic hunger. But it is all temporary, to be ended forever when Jesus is fully present with his people. We await that day with great joy and hope, don’t we?

### III. The Results of Grace

We can’t leave this topic without considering some of the results of God’s grace in our lives. This is important because so many in our day presume upon the grace of God rather than actually receiving it and experiencing it. To presume upon the grace of God is what the apostle Paul was talking about when he asked, **“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”** (Rom. 6:1), only to reject that idea in the strongest terms possible. W. H. Auden once parodied this presuming upon God’s grace in these terms: “I like to sin/ God likes to forgive/ The world is admirably arranged.”

I notice three results of God’s grace in these verses. The first one is an attraction to Jesus. Did you notice that those Jesus healed didn’t leave? You would think that if a mom and dad brought their crippled child to Jesus and Jesus healed the child, that they would thank Jesus and then take their child home, having received what they hoped to receive from Jesus. But that’s not what happened. Almost no one left, because after three days there was still a crowd of four-thousand men there, with a possible total of around 10,000. What do you think kept them there? Matthew tells us that the crowd “wondered.” That word in English could mean either that they wondered in the sense of questioning or in the sense of amazement. But in Greek, it can only mean the latter. They were amazed at Jesus, an amazement undoubtedly fueled by hearing one another’s stories of Jesus’ healings and deliverances. It was a festive atmosphere, and no one wanted to leave. I think this is one of the reasons the Lord’s Prayer begins the way it does, **“Our Father, who art in heaven.”** Prayer, like everything else in the Christian life, is fueled by remembering the grace of God by which God has become our heavenly Father. That’s why Paul told his disciple, Timothy, to **“be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus”** (2 Tim. 2:1). The grace of God strengthens us in prayer, and in every part of our Christian lives. Self-discipline is a good thing, but by itself will never transform us like God’s grace.

A second result of God’s grace is praise to God. They “glorified the God of Israel” (v. 31). This is why it must be *sola gratia*, “grace alone.” At the end of the day, no one will be able to lay claim to earning anything of God’s good gifts. All human pride will be stripped away and replaced with a joyful praise to God

for his grace. This is the big problem with the idea that one needs to clean himself up before coming to God. It robs God of his glory.

The third result of God's grace is honesty. As we've already seen, the disciples are presented here as possessing to a remarkable degree a spiritual amnesia and unbelief in forgetting about Jesus' provision of food to the five thousand on a previous occasion. How did we come to have this report of their spiritual obtuseness? We have it from Matthew, one of the spiritually obtuse disciples. The grace of God is a fresh wind blowing through our lives, giving us honesty about our own sin and filling us with joy in the amazing grace of God.

### **CONCLUSION:**

John Newton had that kind of honesty when he wrote the words to our closing hymn. He spoke of himself as a wretch and of God's grace as amazing. Newton was raised in a Christian home, but was pressed into service in the British Navy as a young man. While serving there, he embraced a path of sin. While serving once on a British merchant vessel, he was put in charge of the ship's rum supply. Instead of guarding it, he drank enough to become quite inebriated. When the captain discovered it, he hit Newton on the head, and Newton fell overboard. He was rescued by the crew, but more troubles awaited. The ship encountered a great storm and was taking on water at an alarmingly rapid pace. While Newton was working for hours manning the pumps, he feared death. But he remembered the Bible lessons his mother taught him as a child, repented and cast himself on the grace of Jesus.

For much of his life, Newton served as a pastor. He's not known for any great sermons. Rather, he's known for two things. First, he was a great shepherd, expressed often through the letters he wrote. Second, he's known for the hymns he authored. One way in which those two things came together was in his shepherding of a one of his church members, a brilliant but emotionally unstable poet by the name of William Cowper, author of the hymn sung as the prelude in today's service. Cowper was a Christian, but battled depression throughout his life, often attempting but failing to take his own life. As a ministry to Cowper, Newton suggested that the two of them should collaborate on a new hymnal. The product, known as the Olney Hymns, became the most popular English hymnal ever. And it was authored by a former slave trader, Newton, and a suicidal, emotionally unstable man. Such is the grace of God.

If you are just beginning a relationship with God, or need to renew a relationship with him, let me suggest that you begin with God's grace. Here's how you get started with that. Be completely honest with God, and remember that Jesus is full of grace and compassion. Do not deceive yourself with promises of self-improvement, but come to him and receive his grace now.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 15:29-39**

1. Have you ever had an experience of being dependent on someone else for something you had to have? For example, remember Brad's illustration of having to be fed when his wrists were broken. Why is dependence on others so difficult? Are there good reasons for that difficulty? Bad reasons?
2. The hymn, "Come, Ye Sinners," has the line "If you tarry 'til you're better, you will never come at all." Why is that true? That is, why would a person saying that never come at all?
3. We see in this passage that God's grace is universal, going out both to Jews and Gentiles. The idea of God's favor going to Gentiles would have been a shocking idea to first century Jews. Are there categories of people today that we might find shocking to think of God's favor being extended to them? Imagine hearing of large numbers of conversions among this group and finding yourself skeptical.
4. The disciples are remarkable here for their spiritual amnesia, forgetting so soon of Jesus' miracle in feeding the 5000. What are some examples in your life of spiritual amnesia?
5. Grace means that God does not treat us our sins deserve. Rather, we are treated as Jesus' righteousness deserves while Jesus is treated as our sins deserve. Do you detect in your own heart any notion of deserving something from God other than his judgment? Are there ways we might foster a greater sense of deserving nothing from God other than judgment, while also receiving with gratitude his gracious favor?
6. In 2 Timothy 2:1, Paul commands Timothy, "Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus." What are some ways that God's grace strengthens us? Think, for example, of the major means of grace (Bible reading, prayer, fellowship, etc.) and think how God's grace might strengthen you in each of these areas.
7. How does being strengthened by God's grace affect our emotions? That is, how might your emotional life be different if the grace of God were a more prominent part of your life?
8. One result of God's grace is greater honesty, as seen in the fact that Matthew, the author of our text and one of the 12 disciples, was willing to be honest about his own unbelief and spiritual amnesia (as seen in the sarcastic question of verse 33). How might God's grace be calling you to greater honesty?