Section: Doctrine of Salvation (Soteriology)

Wednesday, October 14, 2020

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**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q80. What is saving grace?**

Saving grace is God’s love, forgiveness, and redemption freely and effectively given in Jesus to the elect, who are undeserving of this.

**Grace**: Unmerited favor (or an undeserved gift) given by an unobligated giver.

**Q81. What is opposed to God’s grace?**

Opposed to God’s grace are the lies that we are worthy or that we can work hard enough to earn God’s love and forgiveness or that we can seek, will, or choose Jesus without the Holy Spirit giving us new life and saving faith.

***1st Question (Q80)***

Tonight is an exciting night. We get to speak of the tenant of our faith that is uniquely Christian. We will consider the topic of grace. To start, we will ask the question tonight: What is saving grace?

This prompts the following questions:

1. Where does saving grace come from?
2. What is saving grace?
3. Can we earn saving grace?
4. Why is saving grace important?
5. How do we obtain saving grace?
6. What is the doctrine of *sola gratia*?

To answer these fundamental questions, let us look at our catechism question again. It says, “Saving grace is God’s love, forgiveness, and redemption freely and effectively given in Jesus to the elect, who are undeserving of this.”

We understand saving grace to be the dispensing of God’s love, forgiveness, and redemption. He does this freely. There is nothing outside of God causing God to give grace apart from His divine will. This *saving grace* is effective. It does not fail. It is unfailingly given in Jesus *only* to the elect. The elect are undeserving of saving grace. The only thing that the elect and non-elect deserve is the eternal outpouring of God’s righteous wrath.

In order to prove these assertions, let us now turn to Scripture. We will be working through Ephesians 1 and 2, so please turn there in your Bibles to follow along.

Quickly, let’s start by looking at the brief context prior to the main verses we’re going to study. Paul opens the epistle to the Ephesians speaking of God’s blessing of salvation for the elect, this is outlined in Ch 1:3-14. He then goes on in Ch 1:15 to speak of the His affection and prayer for the Ephesian church.

In Eph 1:19 Paul explains to them the “immeasurable greatness of his [God’s] power toward us [the elect] who believe.” And what is the immeasurable greatness? We see this in verse 20. It is that God “worked in Jesus when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand.” In this and in the following verses we see that Jesus has complete authority over all things, including His church. Paul’s aim here is to show the church of Ephesus and Christians in general the greatness of God, which is certainly displayed through saving grace.

At the top of chapter two (verses 1-3), Paul explains our condition as dead sinners, which we know spread to all people due Adam’s sin as humanity’s representative. In order to fully grasp saving grace, it is imperative that we understand our natural condition.

He says, Eph 2:1-3 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.

Now, turn with me to Ephesians 2:4-6. Follow along in your Bibles with me: Ephesians 2:4-6 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.

This passage helps us to answer our first two questions: Where does saving grace come from? & What is saving grace?

**First, “Where does saving grace come from?”** Saving grace is *from* God. This is plainly stated in verse 4. Paul says, “But God.” It does not say anything about man or anything else, it was God and only God.

**Secondly, “What is saving grace?”** It is, as Paul states, God’s act of mercy and love to make us alive with Christ. Our catechism defines grace in general as: *Unmerited favor (or an undeserved gift) given by an unobligated giver.* This definition most certainly applies to saving grace as well.

And how does saving grace first effect those God loves? It first effects us in the moment of salvation, when we are changed by God from spiritually dead sinners, to reborn—made alive by the Holy Spirit. Paul states this clearly in Ephesians 2:5 – he says “even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ.”

This helps us answer our next questions: Can we earn saving grace? & Why is grace important?

So, **Can we earn saving grace?** To this, we must affirm wholeheartedly that we cannot. Why? It is not poetic license on behalf of Paul to speak of our condition as born spiritually dead sinners. It is reality. The inference to our pre-salvation spiritually dead state is to imply our total inability to choose God or earn grace in any other way. God is the operative agent in saving grace; we do nothing.

BUT - **Why is saving grace important?** When was the last time a corpse got up out of the grave and willed itself back to life, or had any decisive action in coming to life? By definition, a thing cannot intrinsically possess that which it does not have. What is the thing that the dead corpse does not have? Life! Death does not will life, it cannot! It is of utter importance that we are moved upon and reborn by God’s saving grace, lest we perish for eternity.

Look with me at Ephesians 2:8, the passage says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

The Apostle says, “for by grace, you.” Who is you here referencing? Is this referencing all people everywhere, for all time? Is it referring to the Church at Ephesus? Is it referring to the elect of God?

The importance of understanding *who grace is for* is paramount in our lives!

We know the answer to this question from the immediate context in chapter one. As Pastor Rob taught recently, “in the Covenant of Redemption, the Father covenanted [in eternity past] a kingdom to the Son, based on the work the Son would do in time and space to earn and establish that kingdom. It is a kingdom that does not include those who are not individually called into the kingdom by God Himself—those whose lives are not made new, unto being marked by the rule and reign of Christ over their lives.”

Saving grace is for those who are called into the kingdom by God himself. God set forth the Covenant of Redemption in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time. This is referring to the glorious reality that the *in time realities* of the covenantal blessings have come and are coming to fruition in this time.

Ephesians 1:4-10

Eph 1:4 even as he [God] chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love Eph 1:5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, Eph 1:6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. Eph 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, Eph 1:8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight Eph 1:9 making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ Eph 1:10 as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Additionally – the in time realities for the Covenant of Redemption is the basis for 2 Peter 3:9. Peter is teaching us the reality that God is drawing His elect to Himself, through Christ, in this momentary point in history. The text says: 2Pet 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all [of God’s people] should reach repentance.

So – our Ephesians 2:8 text could be rendered as such: For by grace, *those who have been chosen prior to the foundation of the world in the covenant of redemption*, have been saved through faith. That is who the “you” here refers to.

Let’s look at the latter half of Ephesians 2:8, which says, “for by grace you *have been saved through faith.”* I want to focus on this for a moment.

Our next two questions are answered here: How do we obtain saving grace? & What is the doctrine of *sola gratia*?

So, **How do we obtain saving grace?** We obtain saving grace by the power and will of God alone! We come to know, realize, and love God and His saving grace when He causes us to have saving faith in Christ. Those God graciously gives new life have saving belief in Christ as our sole proprietor of justification before God. And we live in ongoing belief, repentance, and obedience unto our eventual, final glorification.

Now, the apostle gives us an idea here as to how we obtain faith. Look at the next portion of our text: For by grace you have been saved through faith. AND THIS IS NOT YOUR OWN DOING; IT IS THE GIFT OF GOD.

This needs no complex exegetical commentary, as it affirms plainly what we must believe about faith. While we genuinely have faith, it is not our work—it is not of us. Faith is indeed the gift of our gracious God. Each of the elect genuinely & willingly have faith once God has graciously given them new life and given them faith.

Our confession speaks clearly to this: 2LBCF Chapter 7.2: Since humanity brought itself under the curse of the law by its fall, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace. In this covenant he freely offers to sinners life and salvation through Jesus Christ. On their part he requires faith in him, that they may be saved, and promises to give his Holy Spirit to all who are ordained to eternal life, to make them willing and able to believe.

Faith is indeed a requirement, but it’s a requirement that God, through the Spirit, works and wills in us to accomplish. All of salvation is entirely of grace. We must truly get that tonight! There is no part of you, apart from God’s will, that ascents to faith, trust or belief in Christ. Even our faith, though required of God for salvation, is willed in us by the Spirit’s work—God is the “first cause” of it.

Finally, **What is the doctrine of *sola gratia*?** The five sola’s, for those of who are wondering why I’m speaking latin, are the five phrases which emerged during the Protestant Reformation regarding the Reformers theological convictions. These were created to represent the essential doctrines of Christianity. One of those essential phrases is Sola Gratia. This means, grace alone. It is the doctrine that the Holy Bible teaches us that the totality of salvation is only by God’s free and effective gift of grace. It is by no other means. If we state that our salvation is by anything *other than* God’s grace, then we are anathema to the teachings of the Bible.

Do we not see sola gratia in our Ephesians verse? Paul maintains that faith and grace are all of God. While we, empowered by God, truly place our trust into Christ, that is only done *after* spiritual regeneration is worked in and through us the Spirit.

Paul continues his reasoning in verses 9-10: [Grace & Faith…the whole package of salvation is] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Again, the Apostle reiterates the sole work of God in all of salvation. Do we achieve saving grace ourselves? No, we do not. Do we will faith on our own? No, we do not. Do we exercise belief? Yes, absolutely, but not until the Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts and causes true, saving faith.

Praise God for grace!

Let’s move on to our next question. We’ve covered saving grace. Now let us cover that which is opposed to grace.

***2nd Question***

Q81. What is opposed to God’s grace? Opposed to God’s grace are the lies that we are worthy or that we can work hard enough to earn God’s love and forgiveness or that we can seek, will, or choose Jesus without the Holy Spirit giving us new life and saving faith.

In this section I will cover the following questions:

1. Can we work hard enough to earn saving grace?
2. Are we able to seek, will, or choose Jesus?
3. Is the Holy Spirit essential to giving new life?
4. Why this way?

Let’s look at the first question to help us address our catechism question.

***Can we work hard enough to earn saving grace?***

Look back at our question; it says, “What is opposed to God’s grace? Opposed to God’s grace are the lies that we are worthy or that we can work hard enough to earn God’s love and forgiveness…”

I want to speak of the nature of saving grace. Grace by definition is un-earnable. Although we are made in the image of God, due to the massive chasm between God and man due to Adam’s sin, we are not worthy of grace.

Turn with me to Luke 18. We will be reading verses 9-14.

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 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!’ 14 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.”

Let’s start with verse 9.

He [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.

Let’s stop and ask a few questions: What did Jesus mean when he said “some who trusted in themselves”? What does it mean for men to believe that they are righteous? And as the text indicates, if our righteousness is derived from the “self”, then does it follow that we will treat others with contempt?

What is the self? The self is a subjective concept, but in its basic definition, the self is our identity as a person. Biblically, what is our identity? The scriptures have many definitions of fallen man.

* Psalm 14:1 ​​​​​​​​The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” ​​​​​​​They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, ​​​​​​​there is none who does good. ​​​
* Romans 3:12 ​​​​​​​​All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; ​​​​​​​no one does good, ​​​​​​​not even one.
* Isa 64:6 ​​​​​​​​We have all become like one who is unclean, ​​​​​​​and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. ​​​​​​​

Because of the fall, our identity has taken on a nature of sinful ignorance and utter rejection of God. According to Jesus, those who trust in their own nature *for* righteousness will treat others with contempt.

Why is that?

According to Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus says that the “great commandment of the law” is “ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” True Christianity is love of God through Christ and thusly love of neighbor. If you are merely seeking a love of self, then you will have no such love for neighbor.

Love for neighbor is not merely caring for your neighbors felt needs, it is truly caring for the soul of another. Christians often conflate true Christian love with the secular notion of love. Bill Gates has done a lot of works for the world with his philanthropic deeds, but we must assess the motivation of his heart. Has he done these things to bring praise to his name? Has he done these things to gratify the flesh’s desire for respect or some other self-seeking idol? Whatever the case, and we cannot truly know his heart, we understand that if his motivation is NOT to rightly glorify God, then his works are but filthy rags.

People who trust in themselves are people who ascribe to some subjective moral scale, intrinsically counting themselves ‘worthy of’ or ‘entitled to something’ before God. Even the atheist who denies the existence of God works from a place of self-righteous merit, he works to gain respect from fellow man while denying the very righteous God who is due all respect.

The unsaved count their works, deeds, and wisdom as notable and indeed righteous before a holy God. How futile that is. The point for drawing this out is to help us see that those who perhaps appear virtuous and yet deny Christ as Lord are absolutely opposed to saving grace.

Let’s continue with our parable: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”

A quick contextual note. The Pharisee is a classically trained and highly regarded Jew. He represents the epitome of what that culture believed was upright in character and personal righteousness.

The tax collector, on the other hand, would have been regarded as the scum of the earth. Tax collectors were hated because of their rejection of Jewish customs and culture. In the biblical narrative, a tax collector would have been a Jew who had taken up employment with the Romans. They would have been regarded as traitors working for the Roman establishment that meant to oppress their own people.

Back to the text: “11 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’”

The Pharisee’s prayer communicates a fundamental misunderstanding of what a biblically defined self should be. Our prayers and subsequent thoughts should never be like this. If we understand that we are saved by grace and grace alone and that we cannot earn saving grace, then we understand that it’s only by God’s grace that we aren’t extortioners and adulterers.

But the Pharisee does not understand. He fundamentally believes in his own work or merit as a factor or trigger to of God’s saving grace. The problem here is that that the law *cannot* save, since no fallen man can perfectly keep it nor escape his guilt imputed from Adam. Partial obedience, even 99% obedience, still wouldn’t be enough. This Pharisee’s fasting twice a week and giving tithes of everything is not going to clear his guilt or provide him the perfect righteousness required by our perfect God. It’s also worth mentioning that the OT covenantal blessings never promised eternal life.

The text continues, “13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,”

Now we come to a pivotal part in the text. The tax collector understood his identity as a sinner unworthy of saving grace, that his own work or merit could not possibly save him. The text says he was “standing far off.” According to one commentary, the tax collector stood far off “to testify [of] the sense he had of his state and condition, … of his unworthiness; … that he was afar off from God, and unworthy to draw [close to] him, and deserved to be kept at a distance from him forever.”

He would not even lift up his eyes to heaven. The guilt of the tax collector weighed heavily on him. He was filled with shame and fear of divine wrath.

He prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Though this prayer is concise and short, it is grand in what it does not have. Contrasted to the prayer of the Pharisee, we see this plainly. The Pharisee’s prayer was full of self-righteousness, but the tax collector understood his undeserving position as a sinner by nature. He also understood his penalty. Notice the tax collector’s plea for mercy. No one begs for mercy if punishment is not a reality to be feared.

Jesus finishes with this: “14 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.”

Jesus instructs us of the point to his parable. Meritorious self-righteousness does not produce justification before God. There is no means by which man can produce justification, grace or faith. The man who understands his position as a sinner and receives the free gift of salvation by grace alone through faith alone will always see himself as a pardoned sinner who was headed for eternal hell.

Let’s move on to a few more passages to solidify this point. John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

One of the purposes of the law was to provide Israelites with an understanding of their nature. It was to show them that they couldn’t obey the law and thusly needed to look forward in faith for the Deliverer. Now that Christ has come, merited our salvation through His work, died and resurrected, we have no need to look forward to a different deliverer. We look to the one who has accomplished the work on our behalf. Saving grace is not something we do; it is something done by God through Christ Jesus.

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

Again, we see that saving grace *cannot* be by works. This is really rather logical. If we earn it, is it a free gift? No, it is not. It would no longer be free; it would be earned.

Gal 2:21 I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

Lastly, the Apostle Paul here is explaining that if fallen man could have merited salvation through their own law-keeping, then Christ’s death is really of no importance. There is no righteousness in fallen man by the law of works. We do not earn it. We cannot.

It should follow that if we cannot merit saving grace by any means then we should also claim that we cannot seek, will or Jesus. But, due to many false teachings of a supposed freedom to choose Christ in the church, it is necessary to cover this point briefly.

***Are we able to seek, will, or choose Jesus?***

Look with me at Romans 9:16: 16 So then [election] depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. Here we see the apostle maintaining the sovereignty of God in election. God’s grace is only by the council of His will, and not our human will or exertion.

Paul here gives his evidence: God is God; he can do whatever he wants. He will have mercy on some and compassion on some. He is not bound to our choice. We see this in the preceding verse: 15 For [God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”

Indeed, in the context of Romans 9 Paul explains that Pharaoh was “raised up” so that God would show his power in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Let this sink in. God will indeed harden hearts against Him. As difficult as this is to our human perspective, which are not “God’s ways,” it is thoroughly biblical. It is important to note that no man is sinless and thusly moved from a state of perfection to sinfulness by God. We are all sinners, and because of Adam’s federal headship, our payment is eternal wrath. It is up to God to determine what to do with us. Any grace on God’s behalf is merciful. Period.

In much of Romans 9, Paul is anticipating rejections to the total sovereignty of God. But what does he say? He says: Romans 9:19b-20 “For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”

There are many examples of the sovereignty of God over and above our creaturely will. I don’t have time to give this topic a full treatment tonight, but the scriptures are abundantly clear. I will let them stand for themselves: Prov 16:9 ​The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.

Rom 3:11 no one understands; no one seeks for God.

We’ve outlined tonight that faith is only worked by us *after* the Spirit has regenerated our hearts. Thus, it’s important to specifically speak about the Holy Spirit’s role in saving grace.

With that, we must ask the question – ***Is the Holy Spirit essential in giving new life?***

Again and again, we see scripture assign the role of regeneration or the giving of new life to the Holy Spirit.

We see this in John 6:63a: It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.

And again in Titus 3:3-7: 3 For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

The Holy Spirit lives in redeemed believers and indeed has many functions, but for tonight, I want us to understand that we make no true profession of faith/belief unless the Holy Spirit has first worked in our hearts by the act of regeneration. Any teaching that claims to indicate that regeneration is due our works or faith is a heresy or false teaching and must be opposed. In order for grace to be grace, it must be undeserved. We cannot work for it, and, dead in sin, we cannot even seek it. We will study this point and related doctrine in the following weeks as well.

As we begin to wrap up this lesson, I want to read you a portion of the 1689 Confession of Faith. It covers things we have considered tonight, and it sets the table for much of the study we will be doing in Midweek in this season:

“In God’s appointed and acceptable time, he is pleased to call effectually, by his Word and Spirit, those he has predestined to life. He calls them out of their natural state of sin and death to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ. **He enlightens their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God. He takes away their heart of stone and gives them a heart of flesh. He renews their wills and by his almighty power turns them to good and effectually draws them to Jesus Christ.** Yet he does all this in such a way that they come completely freely, since they are made willing by his grace.

This effectual call flows from God’s free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in those called. Neither does the call arise from any power or action on their part; they are totally passive in it. They are dead in sins and trespasses until they are made alive and renewed by the Holy Spirit. By this they are enabled to answer this call and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it. This response is enabled by a power that is no less than that which raised Christ from the dead.”

***Why this way?***

Finally, why does God set forth His plan for salvation this way? Why is grace the free gift of God?

The Apostle makes this abundantly clear; we are blessed in Christ – (Eph 1:6a) to the praise of his glorious grace. God has given and will give saving grace to the elect one by one. We are indeed doomed without it. But the work of God to save His chosen ones ultimately brings glory to Himself. God acts, ultimately, to bring more glory to Himself.

Saving grace magnifies God’s glory like no other less-glorious man made plan of salvation ever could. Man deserves eternal wrath, and in God’s ransom of some, He is glorified and showed as merciful and loving.

God is shown to be just in condemning and punishing sinners. God is shown to be loving and merciful by saving and adopting sinners. God is shown to be magnificent by doing this through His only begotten son, Jesus Christ. Jesus – the God man, who took on our deserved death, and brough all of what accords with righteousness to the lost sheep worthy of slaughter. Oh, how great is our God!

***Closing***

Grace is not merited. It cannot be. Do not let the devil fool you into thinking that this is bad news. It is the best news in the world to believe that God is the sole actor in dispensing saving grace. We are all deserving of eternal damnation without God’s intervention. We, the redeemed, have been spared. Let that sink it.

The distinctive of Christianity is not that we have figured it out, or that we have somehow manipulated rules in order to convince God that we’re good enough to merit grace. No, we are not deserving of saving grace; we are a wretched people. If not for God’s grace, we would spit in His face forever.

I praise God for His mercy. Let us not scoff at His system. Let us not look at Him and play the judge. Rather, let us understand that He has sovereignly created this world for His glory and for the outpouring of grace upon His covenant people.

What is saving grace? It “is God’s love, forgiveness, and redemption freely and effectively given in Jesus to the elect, who are undeserving of this.” Let that really sink in. Meditate on it.

Mediate on the glory and goodness of God. Mediate on strength and victory of King Jesus. Mediate on God’s unchanging love for you, His adopted child.

We, church, are that people.

Let’s pray.