

Grace Alone

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[0 : 00] We continue in our Living Reformation series tonight celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Tonight we're talking about the fact that we are saved by grace alone.

Luke 15 is a passage about grace alone. It's about salvation by grace, particularly in Luke 15, the Prodigal Son story. Whether you've been in church or not your whole life, the Prodigal Son story is a story that almost everybody in the culture knows about, just like David and Goliath this morning. It's a bit of a cliché, the Prodigal Son.

And that means that when everybody knows about it, that oftentimes aspects of a passage like this are misread or slightly overlooked. And at the center of this passage is the message that grace is about a brother gone into the far country.

And so let's just dive right into it. I want to look at three things tonight, two questions and one statement. First, who needs grace? Secondly, what is grace? And then finally we'll look at some lessons of grace.

So first, who needs grace? Now if you look at verse 11 where the parable starts, Jesus said there was a man who had two sons. So there's a parable that has three characters, the father, a man, and his two sons, an elder son and a younger son.

[1 : 33] And for that reason often Bible translators have stuck in a little title at the beginning that's not in the original text that says the Parable, the Prodigal Son or Lost Son.

But it's sometimes, it's really misnamed. This is the parable of the two sons, the man and his two sons. Three characters, each of the three characters are symbolic just like is the case for all the parables.

And each of the characters points elsewhere represents somebody. And that's somebody that the characters represent are actually people that are standing in Jesus' audience as he presents this parable.

And so you got to know the context. And to get that you have to go back to verse one. If you have a Bible you'll see in verse one it says the, of chapter 15, the tax collectors and the sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus.

Sinners, which means the public scandalous, the publicly scandalous prostitutes, tax collectors and others.

[2 : 40] They were always attracted to Jesus during his ministry. They were always gathered around him everywhere he went. He was very attractive to scandalous people. And for that reason it says that the Pharisees and the teachers grumbled. The old King James and the N.A.V. both say the Pharisees muddled.

Which is really a better word to express the connotation here. Because what they're doing is they're speaking to one another under their breath. It's passive aggressive.

It's the type of, it's eye rolling without rolling your eyes as you talk to somebody. It's in the back of your head. It's the type of passive aggressive tension that all of us have felt in the worst moments, whether it's at your house or in whatever community at work.

But the Pharisees they muddled, which is a great word. They were passive aggressively talking to each other about Jesus. And it says, the reason for that is because this man, Jesus, he eats with tax collectors and sinners.

And that's significant. Today you can go eat with somebody and it's not as big of a deal as it was in the ancient Near East or in the first century.

[4 : 01] Today if a member of the royal family goes and eats with a prisoner in an English prison or with a woman who's been forced into sex slavery, a prostitute of some sort, the pop culture would actually commend it as philanthropy and praise it because they would see it as the royal family and

rightly so is offering help to somebody like this, not so in the first century.

When you go eat with somebody that's scandalous in the first century, it's more like a covenant pronouncement that you want to dwell with them, that you condone their lifestyle. That's what the Pharisees would have saw in Jesus eating with sinners, which means those who have betrayed Judah's tax collectors and prostitutes, the sexually scandalous in the culture.

It's the establishment of an official relationship and it's a big deal. So it's a scandal. And so there are three main characters, the father and his two sons.

The young son is the reckless rebel, the prodigal that goes off and squanders all the wealth. And this prodigal is meant to represent people in Jesus' audience, the tax collectors and the sinners, the prostitutes that are standing right in front of him.

And there's the elder brother who stays at home and he's obedient and he's incredibly religious and he never does anything wrong. And he follows all the rules and he doesn't really like his dad, but he pretends to.

[5 : 39] And this is, of course, to represent another group of Jesus' audience, the Pharisees and the scribes and the teachers of the law today to put it in modern terms. These are the lifelong strict churchgoers, or at least it could be this other group.

But the main audience, who is the main audience? Who is the parable actually written for? And if you look down at verse one and two, Jesus picks up on the fact that the Pharisees are grumbling under their breath about him, about him eating with prostitutes and tax collectors.

And so it says so for that reason he told a parable. He actually tells three parables. This is the third one. And that means that the main audience that Jesus is speaking to here is not tax collectors and sinners, not prodigal sons and daughters, but the elder brothers, the religious moralists, the scribes and the Pharisees.

He's telling a story about being prodigal in order to teach something to the elder brother, not to the prodigal sons and daughters. Because these prodigal sons and daughters know they're prodigals. They know they're sinners. That's why they're coming to Jesus.

He's talking to the scribes and Pharisees the whole time. That's his main audience. And so the point of the parable, as one commentator puts it, it's not a warning to the prodigals out there. It's a warning to the reputable.

[7 : 13] It's a warning that the inner life, the life in your heart, matters just as much to God as the external life, which is exactly what Derek was talking about this morning.

And so the question, first question, first point, who needs grace? And the answer in this parable is that bad people need grace. And so do the good people, the reputable, the good citizens, the gentlemen.

So secondly, what is grace? And there are two points here. The reformers, the pastors during the time of the Reformation, help the church to once again understand that grace is not a thing that you eat or you drink.

It's not a substance. It's not anything that you can take hold of through any type of action that you perform, whether that's religious action or mercy or anything.

But that grace is different, and it has two aspects to it, as it's commonly been described since the time of the Reformation. And the first aspect is that biblical grace is often said common or universal. I'll explain that in just a second.

[8 : 33] Biblical grace is universal. It has a universal aspect to it. So this passage, it's in two acts, two acts like a play. And the first act is all about the prodigal son. And if you look at Act I, Scene I, which starts in verse 11, the younger son comes to the father, verse 12, and asks, Father, give me the share of the property that's coming to me.

In this culture, the way it works was that a father would, when he died, if he had two sons, he would split his property value between the two sons. The older son would receive two thirds, and the younger son would receive one third.

And so this younger son has come and asked for the one third. But really what he's saying to his father is, I wish you were dead.

He's coming to his father and saying, because the only way in this culture that you can receive what he's asking for is at the death of the patriarch. And this is incredibly shameful for the family that the son is coming and saying, I just want you to die. Give me my property.

And the amazing thing is that the father does it. Now there was one commentator who preached on this passage in 2013 from this very pulpit. His name is Derek. You might have heard of him.

[10:01] He said this, note the father's pain. He knew his son was stepping into folly as he walked out the door. He knew his son was taking an inheritance that his father had gathered for him and that the boy was going to destroy it.

And the most incredible thing here is that the father gives it to him anyway. And other commentators have said that this moment is meant to draw us back to the very beginning. The beginning of human history to Genesis 1-3 where the father who created everything out of nothing gives good gifts to human beings.

And those human beings whom the father knows will do this, shake their fists in his face and squander his gifts instead of steward them like they were told to.

And here in this passage, the father, he gave his gifts away to his son knowing exactly what his son was going to do with them. Now in the ancient Near East, in the first century, this meant more than going to the bank and getting a third of your money that you saved in the bank out for your future inheritance.

[11:22] It means more than that. There's no RBS. What this means is that money is all tied up in land, in cattle, in sheep. They don't have a lot of liquid incomes sitting around.

What this means is that, and the Pharisees would have known this, it's scandalous because the father will have to sell his property, parts of his property, his cattle, his sheep, in order to be able to give the son the third that he's asked for.

It's an immense expenditure and it would have taken an immense amount of time. And the people in this culture would have known that and that makes it incredibly shocking and scandalous and shameful.

The father does it and he gives gifts to his son despite his rebellion. And the creator, the father, despite human rebellion, gave gifts to men and after their sin continues to give gifts anyway. And this is called common grace. This is the first definition of grace that the Reformers developed. It's called common grace. Common grace is God's kindness, his compassion, his favor to human beings, his willingness in the face of their shaking fist, in the face of human hatred to give gifts to human beings despite sin.

[12:45] In other words, common grace is a temporary solution to the problem of death. In Genesis chapter 2, God said, Obey me or you will surely die.

In Hebrew, the verb die is used twice. You will die, die. It's emphatic. And they disobey him and instead of dying, dying, they actually get to live.

They don't just die. And so common grace is God's grace to you to breathe today, to wake up this morning, to sit here tonight, to sit in a chair, to have a personal identity, to bear a name, to draw a breath.

Jesus talked about it in Matthew 5 to 7 during the Sermon on the Mount when he said, God continues to give rain and sunshine to both the just and the unjust.

That he continues to raise up crops, to sinners and believers alike. Common grace is universal. It's the fact that the world exists.

[13:54] That's common grace. And it stays death in order for redemption to happen. You see? For a moment. Common grace.

The theologian I read earlier in the spotlight, he puts it this way, please note, he writes, Grace alone should not be construed narrowly as a matter of salvation only, but it should be seen also as the very definition of who God is.

Grace is the way in which God extends himself to the world so that creatures can have the possibility to come to know him and love him. So, and there's an aspect in the Bible that everybody is under the grace of God.

Okay, but then there's a second aspect. The Reformation helped us to discover, to rediscover, and that's special grace, particular grace, redemptive grace.

So, if you look back at the passage, Act 1, scene 2, commentators often call this the scandal of the pigs. This whole passage is just a bunch of scandals, by the way, if you haven't picked up one.

[14:57] This is the scandal of the pigs. Act 1, scene 2, it starts in verse 13. The kid, the younger brother, he goes out, he squanders or recklessly spins all of his wealth.

That word, reckless there, by the way, is the place that we get the word prodigal. It's the, sometimes I translate it prodigal. He's the prodigal son. He spins everything. A famine hits, and he gets hired by a farmer who allows him to feed his pigs.

Now, in the Jewish culture, of course, pigs were unclean, and this is the Pharisees that Jesus is talking to. And so, they're scandalized. This boy has committed to a job of feeding the pigs, which means perpetual uncleanness.

You have no favor before God in this job. But even worse, he doesn't just feed the pigs. It actually, Luke says that he longed to be fed by the food that the pigs ate.

In other words, he's not even on the level of the pig, because he wants to eat the pods that the pigs are being fed, and he can't. In other words, Jesus is setting this up to be ridiculous.

[16:03] He's below the level of the pigs at this point, the boy. So this is the scandal of the pigs. Scene 3, verses 17 to 24, the scandal of grace.

What happens is the boy from verse 17 comes to his senses. He realizes how stupid he's been and how much he's just shamed his father.

And he decides he will go home, but he knows that he can't just go home. Because rabbinic teaching, the teaching of the rabbis, the teaching of the Pharisees, based off the fifth commandment.

I just got the fourth commandment, the fifth commandment, yes. I hope I got my commandment in order there. Honor your father and mother. Whatever one that is, I knew it a minute ago, but I can't remember now.

The fifth commandment, I think. The rabbinic teaching looked at that commandment and said that anyone who shames his father or mother in a particular way requires that they be disowned, formally disowned, and so far that they no longer bear the status of son or daughter.

[17:14] And the only way to retain it is by a period of labor. And so the boy here says, I will go back as one of my father's hired workers, and I will work for him for a period, for a season, in order to earn my status back as son, you see.

And it's exactly at this point that the Pharisees would have been like, that's right, you know, that's exactly what needs to happen. That's exactly what we believe too. You know, this boy needs to come back, work for seven years, for 14 years, whatever, as a hired servant, and maybe then he can get his status as son back.

And the scandal, the scandal of grace, what's about to happen is meant to infuriate the Pharisees, you see. The father sees his son on the horizon, and he pulls up his robe to run to him, which is an act of shame for a patriarch in this culture.

No patriarch would run with his robes pulled up, that's a child's game. And then when he gets to his son, his son tries to explain his plan to his father in verse 22.

He tries to say, Father, I've sinned, if you will take me back as a hired hand, I will work for you for X amount of years, and maybe I can earn my status. And his father interrupts him in verse 22 and says to his servant, go get the best robe in the house, and bring it and put it on him, and kill the fattened calf.

[18:47] I will not let you try to earn your status back as my son. You cannot earn your status before the father as a son or daughter. And the best robe in the house is, of course, the father's robe.

And it says, put a ring on his finger, which would have been the family's signet ring, which is the ring that bears the name of the family, the name of the father, the name of the patriarch.

And so Jesus, of course, is talking here about prodigals, about sinners, about prostitutes, about tax collectors, and he's saying, you can't be one of my hired men or women.

You don't earn your status as a son or daughter in my household. It's given to you by grace. It says that he was moved by compassion.

So the second aspect of grace, redemptive grace, it's God's unmerited favor, is putting away the reckless squandering of his children.

[19:57] It's seeing his son or daughter standing on the horizon, coming home, and running to them. God's grace is radical.

It's hard to understand, but there is a faint analogy, I think, and from the human perspective, if you have children, you have to face something of God's, the Father's grace, to his people.

If you have children, then your own child, your son, your daughter, becomes a teenager and takes away your money and tells you that they hate you, which happens all the time.

And they run and they go live a life of rebellion and misery, and they come under and they come home in whatever condition.

But you see them out on the horizon, and it's been years. Your son, your daughter, what do you do? And not all parents, perhaps, but you run to them and you say, come home.

[21 : 05] We'll talk about it, but come home. Let's have a feast. There's a faint analogy there of grace, compassion of the Father for the human beings that he wants to come home.

It's God's disposition despite human sin. So, act two briefly. The story would have ended wonderfully right there.

We have a nice definition of grace developed. The story would have been fine, actually, if Jesus would have stopped at that very moment. But he doesn't. Why? Because he's talking to the Pharisees, not to the sinners.

They already understand this. He's talking to the Pharisees, and they're not moved to tears. They're not moved in their hearts to compassion themselves towards these people.

They're infuriated by this. And so, secondly, in act two, you have the Elder Brother scandal. It's very short. The Elder Brother actually also defies a cultural norm in this passage.

[22 : 14] There's another scandal. There's a fifth scandal here. The Elder Brother is in the field, and when he realizes that the Father has thrown a party for his younger brother, he goes and he demands, he refuses to go to the feast and demands that the Father come out.

And that's in first century culture, if you read wider, is incredibly scandalous. You do not call a patriarch out of a feast that he is hosting because of anger.

And especially, you would not publicly display inter-family strife in a situation of feasting like this. And so, he's actually reacting with another scandal, a different type of scandal.

Now, he's incredibly angry, and he says, you've not given me a goat, but when this son of yours, you notice that he's distancing himself from his brother.

Not my brother, but that son of yours, when he came home, you killed a calf frame, you threw a feast for him. I've been here the whole time. And then he says, this son of yours devoured your property with prostitutes.

[23 : 33] Now, that's important. What's he saying? Why is the Elder Brother so mad? He's so mad because what he's saying is that there's been a deep injustice done, and you have to think about it a second to get it.

It's that when the younger son left with a third of the money, that's fine to the Elder Brother.

Because then the Elder Brother can work with his father and garner more wealth, and then when his father dies, he'll actually retain the whole of the inheritance that they've gathered since the son left.

But now the son's come back, and he's been accepted back into the household, which means now the son has the right to get another third of the inheritance, even though he's already squandered his first third.

Now, if you do the math, that means that the Elder Brother will lose 22% of what he would have originally lost.

Not 33, I know that's your instinct, but it's not true. 22% if you work it all out. And so when he says, this son of yours has gone with prostitutes and squandered your property, what he's doing is passively saying, my property is being squandered.

[24 : 45] I've been here working for it, and now you're going to give him another third, which means I'm going to lose 22%. And the way the father reacts is this, just to close the parable, and we'll draw some conclusions and be done.

He said to his son, son, you are always with me, and what I have, you have. And so what he does is he turns it on his head and says, look, forget about the property.

What I have property-wise, that's your property. You can have it. I don't care. And then he says, but it's fitting to celebrate and be glad right now, because your brother has come home.

And he said, this son of yours, but now he's saying, no, your brother, your brother has come home. Forget about the property. And so what he does is he turns his older son away from thinking about the material gain of obedience, what you can get if you obey to his inner life, and saying, what about your heart, man?

Are you not celebrating? It's a season not to think about inheritance and property, but to celebrate a son that's come home. What's wrong with your heart? And so what Jesus is saying, elder brothers, religious moralists, rule followers that are trying to earn God's grace by works, your inner life matters just as much as the outer life.

[26 : 22] You can stay home and never go squander your wealth by prostitutes and still be prodigal. That's what he's saying. And at the very end of the parable, we expect something like banishment of the elder son, condemnation of the elder son, and actually what we're left with is an open invitation to the elder son.

Jesus actually leaves the parable by telling the elder son that he's welcome to come into the feast. And we're not told what he does. What does he choose? Why?

Why does Jesus not tell us, did the elder brother repent and go to the feast? Why? Because the elder brothers are standing right in front of him as he talks, the Pharisees, the religious moralists, and he's leaving it to you. What are you going to do? Will you come to my feast?

Will you understand that your inner life is just as broken as the outer lives of these people? So the point, getting grace by works, even religious works, it's not salvation. Religious moralism is not salvation.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 2, 4, do you not know that God's grace is intended to lead you to repentance? That's the point of the parable. Okay, we're not going to do the third point at all. Let me close with this.

[27 : 54] This is not the whole story of grace. There's something missing here. And people have pointed this out for years. There is an immense love of God, a gracious love of God in this passage, but God seems to give his love away to these prodigal sons with no instance of atonement or justice being done, as if God forgives sin willy-nilly in the passage.

And so some people have come to this passage and said, see, the cross didn't have to happen. God can show love to people without atonement, without justice being done.

He's simply a God of love. He's simply a Father who opens his arms with no need of divine justice being satisfied. But I think there's a hint here of the radicality of God's grace and the need for justice.

And it's just very quickly, two minutes and we'll be done. It says in verse 13 that the prodigal son left his father's home for the far country.

That the prodigal son left his father's home to go out into the far country. And the far country throughout the New Testament is a place of death.

[29 : 19] It's a place outside the home life of God where you dwell at home with the Lord. It's a way of describing being ultimately alienated from God. His sons, human beings have gone off into the far country.

They are not at home. And there are multiple ways to go off into the far country. The prodigal son went into the far country externally, geographically, by his obvious visible scandalous sin.

And the elder brother goes off into the far country in his heart, even though he's at home with his father the whole time. Now the question I just want to leave you with is what should the elder brother have done?

What should the elder brother have done in this story? What would a good true elder brother have done? There are three parables in Luke 15.

The first parable, the point is that there are 99 sheep and one goes missing. And the true shepherd goes out into the far country to find the one sheep that's lost.

[30 : 24] No matter how many he has left at home. The woman has 10 coins and she loses one and she flips her entire house over to find the one coin. She'll do whatever it takes. It doesn't matter if she has nine others.

What would the true elder brother have done when his younger brother left like this into the far country? The true elder brother would have lost the benefits of his father's home life and gone out into the far country to bring his brother home again.

We need a true elder brother. Religious moralism, good works will not do it. We need a true elder brother who will go into the far country to bring us home.

Hebrews 11.17 says that the elder brother was made like his brothers in every respect. He is the brother, Jesus Christ is the brother of sinners, the brother of churchgoers, the brother of rebels, the brother of prostitutes, the brother of the sexually broken, the brother of the scandalous peoples, and

the brother of the people who have been in church their whole life and have everything put together on the outside.

And he's the brother that went into the far country. The far country of forsakenness, the far country of death, the far country of being destroyed in order to bring us, prodigals, home again to the Father.

[31 : 56] The point of this parable is that grace is ultimately fulfilled in a better elder brother than this one. Let's pray. Father, we thank You for teaching us through parables and we ask that this picture would give us a hint of true grace.

In Jesus' name, amen.