

Reformation 500: *Sola Gratia*

People might like to think that the Reformation was an exciting event, worthy of an action hero film. While some very exciting things did happen, the truth is that a large part of the Reformation was a battle of words: words in letters and books, words from pulpits, and words in the University lecture hall. But make no mistake, words are important, especially when those words are taking us away from or drawing us back to God's Word, the Bible.

From the Spring of 1515 until the Fall of 1516, Martin Luther entered the Wittenberg University lecture hall on Monday and Friday mornings at 6:00am to lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans. According to the custom of the time, he would work through the text, commenting along the way. This is some of what Luther said on Romans 3, verses 20, 23, and 24 (with quotations from the Bible text in *italics*):

20. *For no human being will be justified in His sight by the works of the Law*, but rather, on the contrary, the works of the Law are accomplished as a result of justification and righteousness. For we are not righteous because we act according to the Law, but because we are first righteous, therefore we then fulfill the Law; *since through the Law comes, or is, the knowledge*, but not the forgiveness, and thus not justification, *of sin*, so that proud men who do not know their sins may be humbled. ... 23. *Since all have sinned*, have been made and declared to be sinners before God, *and fall short of*, that is, lack, are empty of, *the glory of God*, ... *They are justified as a gift*, that is, all, as many as are justified, are not justified except freely, *by His, God's, grace*, without merits or works. This grace is not given except *through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*. (*Luther's Works, American Edition, Volume 25, pages 30-31*)

Teaching directly from the words of the Bible in this way, Luther's liberating discovery of the Gospel already was beginning to take shape. Many thought (and still think) that we can get right with God by doing things that please God, but the Bible says otherwise. Trying to become right with God by works isn't possible. As Luther said elsewhere in his Romans lectures:

The fact is that neither the works which precede nor those which follow justify. How much less the works of the Law! The works which precede do not justify because they prepare for righteousness; those which follow do not justify because they demand a justification which has already been accomplished. For we are not made righteous by doing righteous works, but rather we do righteous works by being righteous. Therefore grace alone justifies. (*LW, Am Ed, 25, 242*)

As Martin Luther built his theology on this foundation, God was preparing him for a key conflict that would launch that movement we call the Lutheran Reformation.

... to be continued!

Sola Gratia means "Grace Alone." It's not what you or I do that makes us right with God, but God's grace alone. This "grace" is not something that God puts in us for us to use. Grace is something in God. It's his mercy toward us because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because of which he pardons our sins.