

LUTHER 500

Evangelicals Concerned Fall Weekend / Ocean Grove, NJ, Oct 6-8, 2017

Sola Gratia

Well, what did you *bring* with you *this afternoon* – besides all that coffee you drank to *stay awake*? What did you *bring* with you? What I'm really asking is this: What did *you* bring with you when you *came into the world*?

When *you came together* in your mother's body, when one of your father's millions of sperm made it into your mother's egg – and *then* and *there*, *you* were! – what did you bring with you? The truth is, on your *arrival*, you *brought nothing* that you hadn't been *given*. And, *that's a given*. That's God's *grace*.

What were you *given*? *Gifts galore!* And those gifts keep on *giving*. That's *a given*, too. That's *God's grace*.

You arrived *packed* with *protection and promise* in your DNA – a random mix of your parents' genes. They, in *their* turns, decades before *you*, *inherited* their genes from *their* parents. Their parents inherited *theirs* from *their* parents, and so on, back down through the distant and now long forgotten past, probably beyond the seas.

That *past*, though, is *here and now*, in *you*, *personally*. You got it as a gift. You didn't *earn* it. You didn't *intend* it. You were totally oblivious to all of these gifts that came wrapped in the *gift* that's *you*. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

In *your* blissful oblivion, your mother gifted you by keeping you safe, “hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine”, in words by Marilynne Robinson. And you escaped what's forced on over three thousand pre-born Americans each day, whose lives in *this* world are cut short. *Your* life was left as a gift to *live out* in *this* world. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

In your mother's infancy, her tiny ovaries held some two million *immature* eggs, *follicles*. By the time she reached puberty, she still had around 400,000 of those follicles. With every menstrual cycle, she lost a thousand, and still, around 400 matured into *actual* eggs. *You*, in part, came from among those two million follicles and then from among those 400 eggs. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

And even with the more than three million *differences* between *your unique* genome and everyone else's, *you* nonetheless share 99.9 percent of *your* DNA with *everyone* else – even with those in this room! So, be nice. We're genetically connected with each other – as Scripture, rather more poetically put it long ago: “God made all of us of one blood to inhabit the earth”. (Acts 17:26) And it's all a *gift*. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

In each of your body's one hundred trillion cells, your body was given genes of *instruction*. And in every cell of 23 pairs of chromosomes, the pair of *sex* chromosomes has determined, essentially, whether *you're a male or a female*. That's *a given*, too. That's *God's grace*.

You were given *yourself*, *your own particular* – or, even, rather *peculiar* – *you*, this *you* who is, indeed, *uniquely* you, yet, is, as well, *uniquely related* to *everyone else*. Still, there *never was another you*. There'll *never be another you*. You're a *gift from God* to *you* and *you're a gift from God* to *others*, too. And, they are gifts of God *to you* and to *themselves* and *others*, too. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

We came into a *world* that was *waiting* for us, though we had *no clue* that this was true. It was a world within a universe that was *already*, *just right* for *our life*, for *our physical needs* for air,

water and sunshine. Long ago, the earth was *meant* for *our* arrival and was *prepared* for *our* arrival and for *our* flourishing here and now.

You also were given your more *personal* world *within* the *wider* world, at a *particular time* in history, and at a *particular place* on the planet. There were already established socioeconomic, ethnic, cultural, political, racial, religious and other circumstances in both your more *immediate* context and in the *wider world* around you. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

So, we all arrived with *nothing that we hadn't been given*. *We, ourselves* and *our place* in this wide world of time and space were, and still are, *gifts to ourselves*, *gifts to others* – *for better or worse* – *who're gifts to themselves* and *us* – *for better or worse*.

Whatever we are and whatever we've found here, has been *given* to us *for us to make something of it*. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*. We've been given God's *call* to use what we've been given to develop the latent potential that we find here. (Gen 1:26ff) That, too, is *a given*. That, too, is *God's grace*.

The prophet Jeremiah relayed God's own words: "Even *before* I formed you in the womb, *I knew you*, and even *before* you were born, *I consecrated you*." (Jer 1:5) Consecrated *before* birth! So, even had you been *aborted*, or after having been *abandoned* or otherwise *abused*, God's own *blessing* on *you* was never revoked. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

We were *dedicated* by God – each with his or her own special part to play in conserving and cultivating what we've been given in *ourselves* and in *all we've found around us* as we've grown up *around others*, in order to treat *them* as *we* wish to be treated. God did not call us to boredom, but to *adventures* for our good and for the good of others. That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

Said Isaiah: "Thus says the Lord, *your Redeemer* and Creator who *formed you from the womb*: 'I AM the Lord, who made *all things*.'" (Isa 44:24) "Redeemer"? Uh-oh! "Redeemer" means *we've gone wrong*. *Bad news!* Yet, "Redeemer" means One Who *rights wrongs*. *Good news!* That's *a given*. That's *God's grace*.

Martin Luther's life and work helps to prepare us for living *our Christian* lives, with *our Redeemer*, these five centuries later. Do we not see, in Luther's preaching, that, that *redemption*, too, is *all of grace*, as is *all else, all of grace*?

Systematic divines divvy up God's grace into what they call "common" grace and "special" grace, and that can make some sense. But *both creation and redemption* have always been and always will be, in all ways, *about the sovereign grace of God*.

And *best of all*, as Paul said, we're *called* to be *made fit* to be *God's children, co-heirs with Christ*, that *we* might *suffer with him* that *we may also be glorified with him*, for *life is in Christ* and *to die* is the gain of the *joy of even a closer relationship with Christ*. (Rom 8:17; Phil 1:21).

Five days before the *tenth* anniversary of his posting of his 95 Theses, Luther wrote to his dear friend, the shy yet brilliant young scholar, Phillip Melanchthon, systematic shaper of Luther's often rambling but profound insights. In that letter, Luther shared his overwhelming gratitude for the generosity of God's grace, not as that distorted, so-called, "grace" that had been twisted so badly into Rome's demands for "strenuous efforts, endeavors, or works" to *win* pardon and approval from God, but as it *truly* is, as Luther noted, "that favor with which God receives us, forgiving our sins and justifying us *freely through Christ*." That's *a given in Christ*. That's *God's grace in Christ*. So Luther told Phillip: "I'm seeking and thirsting for nothing else than a *gracious* God. And", Luther added, "God earnestly offers Himself *exactly that way* and urges even those who spurn Him and are His enemies to accept Him as the *gracious* God that *He is*."

Luther said that this free gift of *justification* is how God "wishes us well". It's *all* about God's "grace: the forgiveness of sins for the *sake* of the Christ" who bought our redemption on the

cross, and not what we're told comes from *sales* of indulgences. Luther's *personal* testimony was this: "Grace is freely given to the very most undeserving and unworthy."

Of his own experience in *discovering* God's grace, he exclaimed: "I felt myself absolutely *born again*. The gates of Paradise had been flung open and I had entered. Then and there the whole of scripture took on another look to me." This Gospel of God's free grace is at the very center of God's continuing relationship with us.

And thus, on the authority of God's Word *in Scripture alone, sola Scriptura*, we, too, *may* learn, we *need* to learn, are *blessed* to learn, what *Luther* learned: That our *only* hope, as the sinners we obviously are, is in God's gift of *free grace alone, sola Gratia*.

Luther understood from his own miserable experience that we're all tempted to try to *buy* God's forgiveness by trying to put God in *our* debt, instead of admitting that, we're *all in debt to God*. *God's* grace is not *ours* to grant to *us*; *God's* grace is *already given* to us, for *God, in Christ*, created and redeems us. Luther learned that, by trying to bribe God, we're only "adding sins to sins".

He understood that our "sin and death were *overcome for us* in and through Christ. Grace and life were *given* to us, but it meant *bitter work* and *agonizing death* for Him. *He earned it for us*, at the *greatest of costs*: His own life's blood and body." Moreover, as Luther learned from Scripture, this "Lamb, was slain from the creation of the world." (Rev 13:8) His *crucifixion* was set in place before *the world* was set in place. And that sacrifice was finished when he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Therefore, and again, as Luther wrote: "Anyone who thinks that he, himself, will come to grace by doing whatever *he* is able to do *on his own* is, indeed, adding sin to sin, and he then becomes even doubly guilty." Having said this, Luther quickly adds these words of *comfort*, reminding readers that, this is "no cause for despair. Rather, it *moves* us to *humbly seek* this free grace of Christ."

Three days after the *twentieth* anniversary of his 95 Theses, Luther was preaching on John the Baptist's pointing to Jesus and announcing: "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Said Luther: "Either sin is *with you*, lying on *your* shoulders, or sin is lying on *Christ*, the *Lamb* of God. If it's lying on *your* back, you're *lost*, but if it's resting on *Christ*, you're *freed*, and you'll be *saved*. Choose what you will."

Is the choice so hard? To *self-righteousness* it *is* a *hard* choice. *Self-righteousness* is the same now as it was in Eden – the *deadly* temptation to try to be *God's god*, to *assert control over God*. So, Luther examines this *lunacy* of humanity's *refusal* to take God at His word. He writes that our resistance against God is truly *pitiful*, when God Himself makes the offer, saying: "My friend, two ways lie before you; choose one. Would you rather have *My grace and eternal salvation for nothing*, bestowed and delivered without any expense or toil on your part, or would you prefer to *try to earn* these good gifts with *your works* and yet *not attain any of them*?"

Self-righteousness stalls in *annoyed resistance*: "I'm thinking! I'm thinking!" It foolishly finds that the choice between *self-righteousness* and *God's* righteousness *is* too hard to make. So, lost in daydreams of saving *ones' self*, one chooses to stay lost.

In his sermon on John 1:29, Luther noted: "I must simply say that the Lamb of God *has* taken away the sins of the world and that I *have* been earnestly enjoined to *trust* and *confess* this, nay, to *die* on this fact." He asks: "Do *you* not hear what St. John says at this point: This is *the Lamb of God* who takes away the sins of the world? Surely, you cannot deny that you are a part of the world of *human* beings; for you were born a man or a woman and not a cow or a hog. In consequence, *your* sins must *certainly* be included in Christ's *burden* as well as the sins of St.

Peter or St. Paul! ... So, do *not* follow *your own* notions, but grasp onto the Word that promises you forgiveness of sins through *the Lamb* that takes away *the sins of the world* if one but trusts.”

Knowing how resistant we all can be, Luther observed, “Human nature wants to have a sense of certainty *before* it believes. Faith wants to believe before it feels.” Psychologically, we *feel* as a result of what we *believe*. So Luther calls for our need for *greater light* than *we ourselves* can give us. He says: “This is the reason why *human* nature goes no farther than it can *see* by *its* light. But”, he explains, “God’s grace steps forth cheerfully into that darkness, follows the plain Word and Scripture, no matter how things *seem* to be; whether human nature thinks them to be right or wrong, *grace clasps onto the Word*.” So, the seeker of God’s grace alone is brought back to Scripture alone.

It’s with such dependence on the truth of God’s Word, where we find, revealed, God’s grace, that we leave behind our ludicrously *self-righteous* efforts to put God in *our* debt and move on under the welcoming love of God’s grace, to *trust* in the One who came *for* us by way of the *cross*.

As Luther presented this Gospel one Christmas, he said that, “we receive grace at once and fully. Thus, we’re saved. Good works do not *need* to come to our assistance in this, *but they are to follow*. It is”, he said, “precisely as if God were to produce a fresh, green tree out of a dry log. That tree would then bear its natural fruit.”

Luther went on to describe the evidence of such fruit of God’s grace: “Grace hears, it leads, it drives, it draws, it changes *us*, it works all through us, and lets itself be distinctly experienced. It’s hidden, and yet its resulting fruit is evident. *Words and works* then reveal *where grace is living*.”

Neither Luther nor Paul *invented* God’s grace. Luther and Paul were *found* by God’s grace. Luther learned what Paul learned and then explained to Ephesians: “*By grace you’ve been saved through faith*. It’s *not of your doing*; it’s the *gift* of God, it’s not based in any works of which you can boast in yourselves.” (Eph 2:8f)

This was in Scripture for more than a millennium. By Luther’s day, it was replaced by ecclesiastical corruption. In later times it was rejected by self-help and self-esteem movements and, later still, by whatever else became the latest in self-righteousness.

In the fall of 1537, Luther preached the biblical promise that the grace of God in Christ is *unlimited*. He took as his text, John 1:16: “We have all received grace upon grace from Christ’s fullness of grace.” He encouraged people to focus on this *inexhaustible* grace in Christ. He pictured the grace in Christ as, “the sun [that’s] not dimmed and darkened by shining on so many people or by providing the entire world with its light and splendor. It retains its light intact. It loses nothing; it is immeasurable.” He continues to illuminate by saying: “I suppose that a hundred thousand candles can be ignited from one light, and still this light will not lose any of its brilliance. ... Whoever wishes to enjoy Christ’s grace – and no one is excluded – let him come and receive it from Him. You will never drain this fountain of living water; it will never run dry. ... All of us, without exception, no matter how devout we may be, we come empty and fill our little casks from His well and His fullness.”

In his greatest hymn, Luther stated: “*Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing*; were not the *right Man* on *our* side, the Man of *God’s* own choosing. Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He, Lord Sabaoth His Name, from age to age the same. And *He* must win the battle.” Did we in *our own strength* confide, *all our striving* would add up to *losing ... to loss!*

Those who are hell-bound to *hide* their palpable spiritual *poverty* with a *pretense of* spiritual *pride* are, indeed, hell bound. Those who, in truth, *admit* their palpable spiritual *poverty* and plead for the mercy of God, so freely given, are, indeed, bound for Home.

Let *us* here, in *this* chapel *this* afternoon, these many centuries later, drink freely of this *living* water of God's free grace in Christ, again and again and again, for his deep well never runs dry. Amen.