

"By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless; My soul, believe and doubt it not. Why stagger at this word of promise? Has Scripture ever falsehood taught? No! Then this word must true remain: By grace you too will life obtain." Those are the opening words of the hymn that we're going to sing for communion, and I think they capture very nicely what it means for us to think about grace and why it's such a problem for us to think about grace as well. Because grace as a concept is really easy for us to grasp, isn't it? I mean, any child can tell you, "Jesus loves me." Anybody can quote the words of Ephesians, "Not of yourselves lest anyone should boast." And every Reformation Day, we always say that we are saved by grace through faith. Yes, grace as a concept is very easy to say, very easy to articulate, but grace as an idea is very difficult for us to understand. Because when we look out into the world, we always think in terms of what is owed to us, what we have worked for. If there was a son of a CEO, for example, who ended up getting the whole company just because he was the son--he didn't work a day in his life. He didn't earn any of it--I think we would say that that was a problem, that he didn't deserve the things that he got. But grace is just that way, Christians. Grace is not a matter of the things that we earn. Grace is what God has given to us freely. Grace is not grace if we deserve it. Grace is grace because we didn't deserve it, and God gives it to us out of his mercy.

So how then, we might ask, do we misunderstand grace? What are some of the ways in which we make it about ourselves rather than about God? Take, for example, the idea that maybe grace is grace because I worked for it, because my works make God pay attention to me. My works make God love me. But really? Do you really think that our works are going to make God pay attention to us, that our works, as sinful as they are, are something that are going to get us off the hook? Because we stand accused, Christians, of high crimes, of treason, because of our sins. And yet, are we going to come to God and say to him, "I paid my parking tickets. That means you should find me not guilty." Is God going to look at that and say, "Oh yeah, you're right. You did this little thing. That must mean that you're not guilty of this big thing." Well, of course not. The problem with our works, Christians, is that they are full of sin, that we are sinners by nature. When we come before God, we're not presenting to him something that is good, but everything that we have said is full of sin. Everything that we have done is full of sin. Everything that we have thought is full of sin. And there's nothing that we can do that's going to change that. Our works will never measure up to be able to take care of the debt that we owe. Grace is not grace because we worked for it.

Well, OK. Maybe we'll say, "Sure. That makes sense. We're Lutherans, after all. We know that we're not saved but our works, right? We always say that on Reformation. So maybe, maybe it's God starts it and we finish it out, that God gets the ball rolling, so to speak, and then we as Christians make up the difference. That our good works as Christians are what really gets us into heaven." Really? Do you think that that's going to work either? Have you looked at the good works that we do as Christians? Have you always done them without grumbling? Have you always done them for selfless reasons? Have you always done them for the sake of someone else and not just to be noticed? I think if we're honest with ourselves, even the good works which we do as Christians are not all that good either, so that if it was a matter of God doing 99% of our salvation, and we just had to make up that one last little percent, just that last little bit, we couldn't do it. Because our works even as Christians are still full of sin. If we had to just do that one little percent, we would never make heaven for that reason. Grace is not grace if we have to make up the difference.

Sure, maybe we understand that. And so maybe we'll say, "Well, maybe it's because of my faith, right? That God looks at me, he sees that I believed, and therefore that's the reason why he gives me his grace, because I believed first and then he gives that as a reward." But do we really want to base it on that either, Christians? Because think about your faith, how much it wavers, how much it waffles, how much it doubts every single day. Do we really want to base our salvation on how strongly we can

believe? Because even the apostles in the Gospels struggled with faith, and they were with Jesus all the time. If we are going to base it all on that faith, what hope is there for us? Grace is not grace because we believed.

The problem, Christians, with all of these things is that they make grace depend on us in some way. Whether it's because of our works, whether it's because we finish the work, whether it's because of our faith, we try to make it dependent on something within ourselves. Because that's the way that we understand getting things. It's the way that the world works. It's got to depend on me somehow. But that's not grace. Grace is not grace because we deserve it. Grace is grace because we didn't deserve it. Because God comes to us and gives us his grace freely, without cost, without price, because he loves us. That's the meaning of grace, Christians, not trying to finish it out on our own, but knowing that our Lord loves us and gives us his mercies freely.

Grace is grace because God chose you, not because you chose him, but he chose you. Even before he created the whole world, he knew who you would be. He knew who you are right now. And he chose you, not because of who you are, not because of something within you, but because of his free love, that love which knows no end. You are here today, Christians, because he chose you. You are here today, Christians, because he loved you and for that reason alone.

And grace is grace because God loves us. Even when we didn't know who he was, even when we were still running away from him in sin, Jesus died for us and gave us himself so that we would live in him. That's the meaning of grace, dear Christians, that Jesus loved those who were his enemies and brought them into the vineyard. Because as we saw in our parable for today, not even those who worked all day got there because they deserved it. God had to go to them, to call them out of where they were and to bring them into the kingdom, because that is the meaning of grace: God coming to us while we were still far away from him.

So Christians, don't lose heart. Grace is not grace because you worked for it. Grace is not grace because you finished it. Grace is not even grace because you believed in God. Grace is grace because he chose you. Grace is grace because he loved you. And grace is grace that brings you here to this day. Nothing except in God has saved you, and he has given you his Son to do just that.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.