



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 8.3 – The Doctrine of Grace

God's Grace in Christ Is Universal Grace

Jesus Himself taught that God's grace is universal when He told Nicodemus: **"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"** (John 3:16-17). God's intention and desire from eternity was to save the world through His Son. From the beginning God intended and desired to save the world, that is all sinners (who all deserve to die because of their sins) in this one way: through giving His own Son into death in place of the sinful world.

What can be clearer than the words of the apostle Paul to Timothy: **"God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth"** (1 Timothy 2:3-4)? The word "**men**" in this passage does not exclude women and children, for here and in many other places in Scripture the term "**men**" refers to all mankind, all humanity. The apostle Peter taught the very same thing: **"The Lord is...not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance"** (2 Peter 3:9).

This was not a new teaching, for even in the Garden of Eden the promise of a Savior was given to the entire human race, which at the time numbered only two persons, Adam and Eve. But they heard God curse their enemy, Satan, who had tempted them to sin, and God promised them that a Savior (the Woman's Seed) would come to utterly destroy Satan and take away his power. To Satan God said: **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel"** (Genesis 3:15).

When God chose Abraham to be the father of the nation from whom this Woman's Seed would come, He promised that this Savior would be a blessing for all. God said to him: **"In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"** (Genesis 12:3). He repeated this promise, saying to Abraham's son Isaac: **"In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed"** (Genesis 26:4), and to Abraham's grandson Jacob, saying: **"In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed"** (Genesis 28:14). Through His prophet Ezekiel, the Lord God even swore in making this testimony: **"As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live"** (Ezekiel 33:11).

Because it was God's desire and intention to save all human beings, His Son Jesus died for all persons on the cross. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, announced this in advance, publicly calling Jesus **"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). After spending a few days with Jesus, a number of Samaritans were convinced: **"This is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world"** (John 4:42). The apostle John testified: **"We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world"** (1 John 2:1-2). The apostle Paul taught the very same thing: **"There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all"** (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

Because of these clear words from Jesus and from His prophets and apostles, we must say that God is favorably disposed towards all mankind in, through and because of Christ's atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. In Paul's grand comparison between Adam and Christ in his letter to the Romans, the

universality of sin is matched with the universality of God's love for sinners in Christ. **"Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more"** (Romans 5:18-20). Adam's sin brought about the condemnation of the whole world. So also the work of Christ brought about the justification of the whole world. Even though the sin of the world was huge, God's grace in Christ's sacrifice is even more huge; it was sufficient to cover every sin and then some. Notice that the term **"many"** in this passage refers to **"all"**, as the context makes clear. Again, Paul says: **"God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all"** (Romans 11:32).

We know from Scripture that not all persons will reach the eternal destiny of salvation that God has desired for them. But this does not change the fact that God wanted them and wants them saved. This does not change the fact that Jesus died and atoned for them all, and that the Holy Spirit earnestly and seriously desires to save them all. This is clear from the words of the apostles Paul and Peter. Paul warned the Romans: **"Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died"** (Romans 14:15). Even one who could be destroyed by a Christian's lack of love is one for whom Christ died, because Jesus died for all. Similarly, Paul warned the Corinthians: **"Because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?"** (1 Corinthians 8:11). The apostle Peter was even more explicit, saying: **"There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction"** (2 Peter 2:1). Even those who will be destroyed in the final judgment are among those who have been bought (redeemed) by the Lord. All of these passages show without a doubt that God's grace is universal, with no exceptions.

This teaching presents a problem for the human mind. It is difficult for us to understand it. The human mind reasons that if God really wanted to save all sinners, then they would all be saved. And yet we know that many will not be saved. Any attempt to solve this mystery by the human mind leads to false teaching. Based on human reason, John Calvin and those who have followed his teaching in the Reformed churches wrongly teach that God's grace is not universal, that God does not want all persons saved, that Jesus did not die for all persons, and that the Holy Spirit does not really desire to bring all persons to faith in Jesus when the Gospel is proclaimed to them. John Calvin's human solution to this mystery is that from eternity God determined to save some persons and condemn others. In Calvin's view Jesus died only for those He intended to save, and the Holy Spirit seriously tries to convert only those God intended to save. What Calvin and the Reformed churches teach on these matters is directly contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture. Yet this is the only way they can make sense of the fact that some people are damned, rather than saved.

On the other hand, there are teachers who follow the reasoning of Jacob Arminius and John Wesley and say that God indeed wants all to be saved, that Jesus died for all, and that the Gospel is meant for all, but the difference between those who go to heaven and those who go to hell is that when confronted with God's Word, some choose of their own free will to accept it, and others choose to reject it. Why is this teaching a false teaching? It is a false teaching because God's Word teaches us that no one has a free will to choose to believe in Christ. We are all dead in sins and cannot contribute at all to our own conversion or our coming to faith in Christ. We are saved by grace alone, as the Bible clearly teaches.

In order to be faithful teachers of God's Word, we must teach both that God's grace is universal and that we are saved by grace alone. If a person is saved, it is entirely due to God's grace alone. If a person is lost, it is entirely their own fault. God wants to save all and Jesus died for all, but some reject God's grace and are lost. But those who are saved are just as guilty as the lost. This is what Jesus Himself taught. On the one hand He said: **"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws**

him... **No one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father**" (John 6:44, 65). On the other hand He said: **"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under wings, but you were not willing!"** (Matthew 23:37).

It is vitally important and necessary that Christian preachers and evangelists preach the Gospel of universal grace. If we deny universal grace, we are no longer preaching the true Gospel: the Good News that God wants all to be saved, that Jesus has atoned for all sins of all person everywhere, and that God is offering total forgiveness of sins to all sinners, not just to a certain percentage of sinners chosen from eternity by God. God earnestly desires to bring about the repentance and ultimate salvation of every sinner. There is no secret plan on the part of God to condemn, pass by or ignore some sinners because He has predestined them to eternal damnation. Jesus said: **"Preach the Gospel to every creature"** (Mark 16:15). Jesus said: **"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"** (Matthew 11:28). Jesus said: **"Repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations"** (Luke 24:47).

The missionary Paul taught: **"God...has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading with us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God"** (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). When Paul met people who did not know about Jesus, he told them: **"Through this Man (Jesus) is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses"** (Acts 13:38-39). Paul did not say: "To some of you is preached the forgiveness of sins." He did not say: "Some of you who believe are declared righteous." He preached universal grace in Christ Jesus. We must do the same.

God wants His forgiveness in Christ to be extended to all. But when this Gospel of God's grace, which is intended for all, is proclaimed, there are some who reject it. This is not due to a desire on God's part not to save them, nor to any lack in the Gospel, any lack Christ's atonement or any lack in the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, God's Gospel does not force anyone to accept it or believe it. God's grace in the Gospel is not irresistible. It can be resisted, and it is resisted by man because of his ungodly desire to resist it and reject it. This is a person's own fault, not God's fault.

When God speaks and works in His uncovered majesty, He cannot be resisted. When Jesus speaks on the Last Day and commands the dead to rise, **"all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth"** (John 5:28-29). But when Jesus' Gospel is proclaimed in the present age, it can be resisted. That is why Jesus said: **"The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live"** (John 5:25). In this verse Jesus is speaking of unbelievers, that is, the spiritually dead. When these dead ones hear the voice of Jesus in the Gospel, some who hear it will come to spiritual life. But others will not really hear it or pay attention to it, and they will remain dead. God does not take the blame for these rejections and refusals; it is the person's own fault that they reject God's word.

When we are tempted to find fault with God for the way He does and says things, we need to remember the Apostle Paul's words: **"O man, who are you to reply against God?"** (Romans 9:20). **"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!"** (Romans 11:33) **"For now we see in a mirror, dimly but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known"** (1 Corinthians 13:12). We must be willing to be **"casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ"** (2 Corinthians 10:5).

By saying God's grace is universal, we are not agreeing with the theory of universalism. Universalism states that God eventually will see to it that everyone in the whole world will attain and enjoy eternal

life. God's gracious will to save all persons everywhere does not mean that He is willing to save in any way whatsoever. God wills to save all only on the basis of Christ's obedience and His suffering and death. There is no other Savior but Christ. God wills to save all by conferring Christ's obedience through His appointed means of grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. There is no salvation conferred on sinful humanity apart from that which is conveyed through the means of grace. God wills to have Christ's obedience received by the sinner through faith in Christ and in no other way. There is no other way to receive the salvation God wants us to have apart from faith in Christ.

We conclude this discussion of the doctrine of grace with this quotation concerning the unconditioned and unconditional Gospel: "The proclamation of Jesus Christ is about the love of God, a love which is all-inclusive and unconditional... God has been credited (by some men) with a conditional love, which places the condition of salvation back upon our own shoulders; because we try hard to fulfill the condition, and when we are not able we feign it... It is not because of us but because of Himself that God forgives us... I insist therefore upon this word 'unconditionally' because it seems to me very important in practice" (Paul Tournier: *Guilt and Grace*, pp. 189-195, emphasis added).

The *Augsburg Confession* mentions salvation by grace alone many articles. Article XVIII Concerning Free Will says: "*Without the grace, help, and operation of the Holy Spirit a human being cannot become pleasing to God, fear or believe in God with the whole heart, or expel innate evil lusts from the heart. Instead, this happens through the Holy Spirit, who is given through the Word of God*" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 50). "*Rejected here are those who teach that we can keep the commandments of God without grace and the Holy Spirit*" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 52).

Article XX Concerning Faith and Good Works declares: "*Our works cannot reconcile us with God or obtain grace. Instead, this happens through faith alone when a person believes that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who alone is the mediator to reconcile the Father. Now all who imagine that they can accomplish this by works and can merit grace despise Christ and seek their own way to God contrary to the Gospel*" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 54).

The *Epitome of the Formula of Concord* (1577) exalts God's grace in this way: "*It is God's will that people hear His Word and not plug their ears. In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia (Acts 16:14), listen to it and thus be converted, solely through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human being. For apart from His grace our 'willing and exerting,' our planting, sowing, and watering, amount to nothing 'if He does not give the growth' (Romans 9:16; 1 Corinthians 3:7). As Christ says, 'Apart from Me, you can do nothing' (John 15:5). With these brief words He denies the free will its powers and ascribes everything to God's grace, so that no one has grounds for boasting before God (1 Corinthians 9:16)*" (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 492, II Of Free Will).

Questions

1. What is meant by the term "universal grace"?
2. How many persons does God want to save? Prove your answer from the Bible.
3. How many persons did Jesus redeem? Prove your answer from the Bible.
4. How many persons does the Holy Spirit desire to convert? Prove your answer from the Bible.
5. Where does the Bible teach that God wanted to save even those who go to hell?
6. Why did John Calvin deny universal grace?
7. Why must we call Calvinism a false teaching?
8. What was the error of Arminius and his followers?
9. Why is it important that we preach the Gospel of universal grace?
10. When can the voice of God be resisted by sinful man?
11. What is the result of such resistance?
12. Whose fault is it when someone hears the Gospel but rejects it?
13. What is the difference between universal grace and universalism?