

**Five Solas
Christ Alone
Romans 1:16-19, 3:9-26**

I have been reading Victor Hugo’s classic, Les Miserables for about a month, now. Well, I have been reading it by listening via Audible. It is a long book and even though I am only about 9 hours into the 60-hour reading of the book, time and again in the story, characters who have run afoul of the law with the smallest offenses and are about to pay the severe consequences of early 19th century French law are rescued by the very person they have wronged and even hated. Les Miserables is a story of love and grace that points to the kind of love that God has for miserable, ungrateful, vindictive creatures who deserve nothing but condemnation from a holy and just Creator. Fortunately – and it is truly fortunate for us – he is also a redeeming God who has made a way to rescue us from our sin and its consequences.

What is it about human nature that wants to earn salvation? We do not like to think of ourselves as hopelessly lost or helpless to stand innocent before God. It is fine for Jesus to be my example, but to say that there is nothing good in me to enable me to present myself to God as worthy of being in his presence? Please! As John Stott said, “Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of him or their unwillingness to admit it.”

Today’s message will address both our need for Christ and the sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross to meet our deepest need – not only to be forgiven of sin, but to possess righteousness. Why is there a need for such a sermon in a Christian church? Because so many have failed to see that Christ alone is enough for salvation.

October of 2017 marks the 500-year anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant movement in which churches moved away from the

Roman Catholic Church because of differences in interpretation of Scripture. Solus Christus, or, Christ alone, is one of the five solas that distinguishes Protestant doctrine from Roman Catholic doctrine. We believe that Scripture alone – not what the Pope says, not what our hearts say, and although the gospel is logical, if counterintuitive, it is not where logic leads us – but Scripture alone points to salvation in Christ alone as our only hope of salvation. We are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone – not good works on our part in any measure – and, our salvation is to the glory of God alone. Indeed!

We need to answer two primary questions about Christ alone, one from the era of the Reformation that also addresses issues of concern today and the other that is more prevalent today than it was in the 1500’s. First, do we, or do we not, need others to represent us to God and to help us along toward salvation? The Catholic Church has established a priestly class that mediates between people and God just like priests in the OT stood between men and women and God. Catholics provide the Pope, the bishops and priests, those who have achieved the rank of Sainthood, and, of course, Mary to represent us to God and to help us get to God. The belief is that we need enough merit to stand righteous before God, and since we lack merit, we find it through the merit of others. The question, then, is Christ’s work on the cross merit enough for me, is it sufficient to make me acceptable to God and does he grant me access to God, or am I dependent on others to help me to be righteous enough?

Second, and what seems to be the larger question today, is Jesus even necessary for salvation, or, as so many think, will any religion do if I am sincere in my beliefs? The question today is not so much Christ alone, but is Christ necessary at all? The answer to that question will likely be determined by what you think of man’s nature. Are we basically good until our circumstances and/or others turn us into less than virtuous human beings, as Victor Hugo

ironically seems to imply in his beautiful story of grace, or are we utterly incapable of being good, as in, good enough to stand before God with confidence that he will accept us?

Scripture gives the answer, from Genesis to Revelation, that our only hope for salvation is in the work of Christ on the cross. Well, Scripture gives the answer for those who believe that God speaks through his word and all Scripture points to Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death, and resurrection in power as its central focus. That is what we believe at Grace Community Church and it is why today's text is meaningful to us, even though there is difficult truth to process in today's text. If you are hung up on those in the OT being saved by Christ's work on the cross, I will explain that a bit later. They did not anticipate Christ, but those who believed God's promises were saved by Jesus' sacrifice. Back to the NT.

The Apostle Paul spelled out the gospel clearly in the book of Romans, and he did so methodically. After his introduction in which he repeatedly speaks of the gospel directly and indirectly, Paul lays out man's need for a Savior. He takes a long time to deliver a devastating case against any ability that we possess to make ourselves worthy of God. Then, he explains how, through Jesus, he is able to be wholly righteous at the same time he declares sinful men and women to be righteous. Our text today is Romans 1:16-18, then chapter 3, verses 9-26. Because of the length of the text, we will only read Romans 1:16-18, and after we pray, we will work our way through the text and answer the following questions: – 1) Was it necessary for Jesus to take the full weight of God's wrath against himself to save us? And, 2) Is Jesus our only hope for salvation and was his death sufficient, or do we need help to become righteous enough to gain eternal life? As is our custom, I will ask you to stand in respect for God's word as it is being read. Romans 1:16-18:

1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

This is the second time in this series that Romans 1:16-17 have been read to enhance the understanding of the sola that we are contemplating, but it will not be until we get to Sola Fide, faith alone, that it will be the main text. After Paul states his confidence in the gospel of Christ and affirms that righteousness comes by faith – hear that again, righteousness comes by faith – after verses 16 and 17, Paul begins to answer the question, “Why is it necessary to believe the gospel to be made righteous?” Verse 18 helps us understand: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

The Greek verb that is translated “revealed” in both verses 17 and 18 is in the present tense, and, thus, emphasizes that both the righteousness of God and the wrath of God are *continually* being revealed against the sinfulness of mankind. God’s wrath, Scripture makes clear, flows out of his holiness and character. God can no more accept sin to comfortably dwell in his presence than you can allow a highly poisonous substance to enter your body without consequence. God’s wrath is both personal and judicial in nature. God’s anger is against sin – and, against sinners. In fact, if God winked at sin and said, “Aww, it’s not that big a deal,” we would wonder about his righteousness. No need to worry.

From Romans 1:18 through 3:20, the Apostle Paul presents a devastating case against all humanity as guilty before God because of sin. The case includes religious and non-religious alike. Those who know about God and those who do not know about God – all are guilty because of Creation and because of the conscience that everyone of us has, allowing us to sort right and wrong. This is the truth that men and women suppress and that brings God’s wrath. Those with the law and those without the law are guilty because all are lawbreakers, and before a holy God, every lawbreaker is fully guilty and condemned, regardless of the nature and degree of the sin. To compound our problem, we are incapable of atoning for our sins. James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” As the NT teaches – in Romans 7 and 8, among other places – there is nothing wrong with the law. It is perfect. The only limitation the law has – and it is a big one – it cannot give life. The law can only condemn.

Some people think that Jesus came as Plan B when those in the OT failed to live up to the standards of the law. But, if one failure is equal to breaking the entire law, who can stand innocent?

Furthermore, in Romans 5, Paul will make a clear case that we were guilty before we ever committed the first conscious sin because we were born sinners. When Adam sinned, as head of the entire human race, he took all of us down with him when he fell. This is not just a NT idea. From Romans 3:10 through 19, no less than nine OT passages are either directly quoted or alluded to from four OT books. Look at the case laid out against humanity. Romans 3:9:

**9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,
10 as it is written:**

“None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

**You may think that you sought for God and that you found him.
But, no seeks for God. He seeks after us. Verse 12**

**12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”**

**13 “Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”**

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

14 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

17 and the way of peace they have not known.”

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

**19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who
are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the
whole world may be held accountable to God.**

And then verse 20:

**20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his
sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

**So, we have partially answered the question, “Is Jesus necessary,” or
“is one way as good as another?” From our text we know that
unless something is done, we will not be justified when we stand
before God. The law can only condemn us, and unless God does
something to rectify our standing before him, he will be just in
sending us to hell. Then those two beautiful words in verse 21:**

But now – whew! As we read the next five verses, look for the five solas – all five are in this text. The highlights on the screen will help, although you will not need help. Verse 21:

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Did you see them? Scripture alone, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, for the glory of God alone! Back to verse 21. Robert Mounce says that this next portion of Romans 3 is “generally acknowledged to be the most theologically important segment of the entire NT.” I do not know how you disagree with his assessment. Since we were unable to attain salvation on our own, God made a way for us to receive the righteousness of God through Christ. With this shift, we are told that no matter how much we want to earn our spot in heaven, we are incapable. As Robert Mounce, again, says, quote: “We want to earn; God will only give. God’s way of righteousness has nothing to do with human performance. It is ‘apart from the law.’” Close quote.

In 1 Corinthians 10:11, Paul, pointing to events that happened in the OT, said this to the church at Corinth, “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” He was referring to the point in time when one age under the Old Covenant had come to an end and the new age, after Christ’s death and resurrection, had come. We have been living in the last days ever

since that time. Not only is Jesus a part of God's plan, it is Christ alone upon which our salvation depends. Furthermore, it is Christ alone or it is nothing.

At the end of verse 22, Paul says, "There is no distinction" – between Jew and Greek, law keepers and law breakers, religious and non-religious. What is it that we have in common? Verse 23 – we have all sinned and come short of God's glory. Instead of condemnation, though, verse 24 tells us that God made a way for us to possess the righteousness required to be worthy of him – and, it is through God's gracious gift of Jesus for all who will believe. In 3-4 weeks we will examine the difference between the doctrine of imputed righteousness and the Catholic doctrine of infused righteousness, which essentially says that we are able to become righteous enough over time – if we work at it. Imputed righteousness simply says, "You are incapable of that kind of righteousness. Good news – gospel – good news: I will count Jesus' righteousness as yours. I declare it and it is so."

So, is God going against his own demands of perfection in the law? Absolutely not! He is making a way, though, for us to be righteous. If you murder someone, is there ever a time in your life when you will no longer be a murderer? No. You may serve time in prison, but you will always be a murderer. What God does for us is so much greater than saying, "Okay, you are a sinner, but if you pay for your sins, if you do penance for your sins, then Jesus' righteousness will help you out." That is not what God says. Jesus paid it all. The truth in Romans 3:21-25 may show the difference between Catholic and Protestant theology better than any other text.

In verse 25, we are told that God put forward Jesus' blood as the propitiation for our sins. There is debate about whether the Greek word *hilastarion* should be translated "propitiation," which means "an appeasing of wrath," or "expiation," which is an atoning

sacrifice, or, covering of sin. You have both translations here today, I can guarantee – propitiation or atoning sacrifice. There are pros and cons for translating it both ways, but we all believe – I mean all of us at Grace – that Jesus’ death satisfied the wrath of God that we have been reading about in Romans. That is propitiation. Don’t freak out if you have the NIV and it says atoning sacrifice. The translators understood the same concept, but there was disagreement about the precise way to translate the word.

Why would we make such a big deal about God’s wrath since it is only mentioned five times in the OT? No, wait – make that 455 times! Several times in the OT God said he would pour out the cup of his wrath on wayward Israel and on the nations. God told Jeremiah to take the cup of his wrath and make the nations drink it. I am fully convinced it was the cup of God’s wrath that Jesus so wanted to avoid in the Garden of Gethsemane. “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

But Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath to the last dregs, so that not only was God’s wrath against sinners satisfied, but as John Stott says, it was *exhausted* on Jesus. Thus, anyone who comes to God in repentance of sin and by faith in Christ’s work on the cross, will be saved. Jesus’ righteousness is credited to his or her account. “But surely I must work for” – no. There is no work you can do. Jesus paid it all and his work alone will suffice for you. OT saints were saved the same way we are – not by keeping the law, but by believing the promises of God. It is just that God’s promises culminate in Jesus and we see much more clearly than OT saints did. The end of verse 25 tells us that God looked forward to the cross, overlooking the inability of his people to save themselves through the law. It is not the OT saints were looking forward to the cross – no one had any idea the cross was coming. They did not look toward the cross, but God did. The plan was always in place.

Always. Counterintuitive as it is, the message of the cross is brilliant. Look at verse 26:

“26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he (God) might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Through Jesus’ blood, God can be just, exercising his wrath against sin, and, at the same time, justify sinners who believe. Let that sink in for a moment.

Maybe one of the best ways to cut through modern-day confusion about God is to simply understand the difference between “do” and “done.” Do not ask yourself, “What would Jesus do,” but, rather, ask yourself “What has Jesus done for my salvation?” He did everything. Christ alone. Jesus paid it all. Let’s pray.