



The Five Solas: Sola Fide

Reformation Prelude, Part 6

David Sunday

October 15, 2017

We're going to come before the Lord and trust in Him as we open His Word. Through the letter to the Galatians, we'll be tracing the theme of *Sola Fide*, "faith alone." Salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone. One of the key verses that describes this is Galatians 2:16: "*So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*"

Martin Luther said this truth of God declaring us righteous—which is what justification means—through faith in Jesus Christ alone won't mean much to us until we consider what a heavy weight sin is. He said if anyone would feel the greatness of sin, he would not be able to go on living another moment—so great is the power of sin. Luther himself felt that way and it was great relief to him when he saw from the Scriptures this wonderful truth that God saves us, not because of anything we do, but because of His grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Luther said hunger is the best cook. "As the dry earth thirsts for rain, so the law makes the troubled heart thirst for Christ. To such hearts Christ tastes sweetest. To them He is joy, comfort and life. Only then are Christ and His work understood correctly."

Let's pray today that the Lord would create this hunger in us.

Lord, I'm asking that today we would feel troubled by the heavy weight of sin, so that we might hunger for the relief that comes through Christ alone, through what He has done for us. Oh, that He would be sweeter to us today, that we would find our joy and comfort in Your Son Jesus and in Him that we would see our Father's love and mercy more clearly. We ask that You would send Your Spirit to empower the preaching of Your Word and our hearing of it. May we receive the Word by faith today. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Before we walk through Paul's argument in Galatians, I thought a story might be helpful to illustrate what we've been talking about these last few weeks. God saves us by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone. This story kind of puts that in a relational context, which is what the Bible is doing. It's telling us God wants us to have a relationship with Him. Remember,

grace is not a thing per se—grace is God Himself showing us undeserved kindness. Actually, He Himself is the gift of grace. He wants us to be in personal relationship with Him.

So this is a story from an old theologian named Addison Leitch, who was the second husband of the missionary Elisabeth Elliot. They were only married for four years when Addison died of cancer. But when I read this story a few years back, it stuck with me. I've read it a few times since and I like the way it illustrates the doctrine we're talking about today. Here is Addison's story:

About 15 years ago, I was sitting at the dining room table looking out the window and watching five boys fooling around with a BB gun. I wondered how long it would be before one of them shot the other in the eye. Finally, one of them grabbed the gun to shoot at a little sparrow sitting on a tree just outside the dining room window through which I had been watching this whole performance.

I could see the whole action unfolding before my eyes. It seemed almost slow motion, uncanny, inevitable. The boy aimed deliberately at the bird, shot at the bird, missed the bird and put a hole in the window right in front of me. Away they all ran, with me racing out of the house after them. I didn't catch any of them.

In a few days I had found that a boy named Dave White had pulled that trigger. Also in a few days I had the window fixed and paid in full. Then I began to think about Dave. He was

evading me at every turn. He would not face me and he had no notion of confessing. In the meantime the other boys had floated back to games in the vacant lot and in the street in front of the house, while Dave—the guilty one—was on the outside of all this, weeping and gnashing his teeth. He would have none of us. So I went after him—not to punish him, but to save him. He had to face me in judgment, then in grace. Only thus could we renew our fellowship. Only thus could I bring him back to the gang.

I caught him alone. Now we stood face to face to have it out. The boy was rebellious, tense, tight, ready to fight, ready to run away again. He admitted that he had wronged me, but I gave him the surprising message that the window had been paid for, that I had no notion of collecting anything from him, that what really interested me was to know how we could get him to come back to the gang again. I told him over and over again the same old story—the price has been paid. It's all over. Let's be friends. What a time I had getting that message through to him. Why? Because he didn't believe me. There is always an unbelievable quality in the wonder of what we call grace.

But I wish you could have seen him when he finally did believe. What a wonderful look. What a release of tensions. What a rolling away of the burdens. What a newness of life. Now he could quit running. Now he could relax. Talk about peace of mind—you should have seen that boy. What total commitment he offered me henceforth, and by no request of mine. There was nothing he wouldn't do for me.



God's telling us, friends, this old, old story. The price for your sins has been paid. There's nothing for you to do. There's nothing for you to add to this. God opens wide His arms and says, "Let's be friends. Let's be reconciled." But we have a hard time believing the good news of God's grace in Christ. We want to add something to it. We aren't sure that we can really trust this message. But when we put our faith in Christ alone—which is a gift from God—what a rolling away of our burdens. What a newness of life. Now we can actually relax and be content in our relationship with God. Now we actually want to serve Him. We love Him. We want to obey Him, because we know He has done so much for us. He has paid for our salvation and accomplished it fully by grace.

What faith believes

So what is it that faith believes? That's where we want to start today. What is it that faith has to lay hold of? What is the truth that God reveals that faith believes? We find it in Galatians 1:3-5. Faith is not a mood. It's not just being optimistic. It's not wishful thinking. It's not believing in yourself. Faith focuses on an object. Faith lays hold of truth that God has revealed; truth you need to be persuaded of; truth you need to know. Then when you're persuaded, it's not just knowing it's true—it's resting yourself now in the One Who speaks this truth. This glorious truth of the gospel is described beautifully here in condensed form in Galatians 1:3-5:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

This is a great statement of the gospel. Let's be crystal clear about what the gospel is. The gospel is good news:

- about grace from God
- bringing us peace with God
- through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross
 - rescuing us from this present evil age
 - resulting in eternal glory to God the Father Who planned and accomplished everything necessary
 - adopting us into His family

That's the good news of the gospel. Clearly, if you believe that good news, it leaves no room for anything that we can be proud of in ourselves. But where is faith in this definition of the gospel?

When you look at these first few verses, you don't see any mention of faith yet. It's all about what God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ have done to rescue us from this present evil age and from our sin. He hasn't said anything yet about what we need to know and believe and trust in that truth. He's not talking about our response to this message yet. He focuses on what the gospel actually is. It's important for us to understand that we're not saved by our faith.

B.B. Warfield put it like this:

It is not faith that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ... It is not, strictly speaking, even faith in Christ that saves, but Christ that saves through faith. The saving power resides exclusively, not in the act of faith or the attitude of faith or in the nature of faith, but in the object of faith.

Faith isn't your savior—Jesus Christ is your Savior. It's important for us to understand this. You're not saved by the quality of your faith. The Reformers liked to talk about faith being like the clasp that holds the diamond to the ring. Faith clasps Christ the way a ring clasps a diamond. Or they talk about faith being an empty vessel which is filled with treasure. Faith, they would say, is our act, but it's not our work. It's the work of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us. It's the Holy Spirit Who enables us to clasp Christ, Who enables us to be filled with the treasure of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not something you can even create in yourself—it must be given to you from God. But the way God creates faith is through the Word—through the hearing of the Word, through speaking promises to us about what He has done for us in Christ, enabling us to believe.

Why justification must be by faith alone

Next we want to look at why the only way to be declared righteous by God is through faith alone. This is what we're going to spend most of our time on today. As Spurgeon says, "Grace is the fountain of our salvation, but faith is the aqueduct through which the flood of mercy flows down to refresh us." Grace is the fountain; faith is the aqueduct. And Spurgeon says, "It's a pity when the aqueduct is broken and apparently it can break pretty easily."

Let's look at Galatians 1:6. Paul says, "*I am astonished...*" He's really fired up in this letter. This is one of his most impassioned writings. At times there's even a holy anger that rises up in him. "*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace*

of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.”

When you look at who these false teachers were and what they were saying, it's shocking to realize how many points on which they actually would have agreed with the Apostle Paul about the gospel. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They didn't seem to have any problem confessing Jesus was God's Son. They believed in His resurrection from the dead. They even believed that it was necessary for a person to have faith in Jesus if he was to be saved. Their difference with Paul was on one particular point: they believed in faith, but not in faith alone. They believed that a person must also contribute something of his own in order to be declared righteous by God. But Paul says, "This is not gospel. You're turning away from it." It's astonishing how quickly we can be led astray on this one point.

Paul is not arguing that obedience is unimportant or unnecessary; he is saying it's a matter of cause and effect. What comes first? In Paul's gospel, here's the order:

1. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
2. At that moment, you are saved. You are justified and declared righteous by God. You are freed from condemnation. And then...
3. ...you proceed to obey God through the power of His Holy Spirit Who lives in you.

That's Paul's gospel. Believe, then you're saved and justified at that moment, and out of God's free grace to you in Christ, you proceed to obey Him by the Spirit.

The false gospel says believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, keep the law as best you can, then you will be saved. Do you see the subtle distinction? What you need to do is test yourself, asking, "Am I believing the true gospel?" Does God love you and accept you, therefore as a result you love Him and strive to lead a life of obedience to Him? Or, do you come to God and promise to lead a good life, therefore God loves you because of the good life you're leading? Or, as Luther liked to put it, are you loved because you are attractive—or are you attractive because you are loved by God? Does God do something and completely accept you and welcome you, therefore you respond out of gratitude to Him? Or, do you do something, therefore God accepts you?

Paul is saying there is no middle ground on this point. As soon as you mix something you do into the gospel, you completely distort the gospel into a non-gospel. If you deviate on this point, you turn the whole thing upside down and inside out. Paul holds no punches for the teachers who deviate on this point. Look at what he says in Galatians 1:8-9: *“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”* Put him under God's anathema. *“As we have said before, so now I say again:*

If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”
This is how seriously Paul takes this.

Now, it’s very possible to believe the gospel of grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone and still get out of step with that gospel. It’s shockingly easy to get out of step. Even really godly people do it. Even apostles like Peter have gotten out of step with the gospel. Look at Galatians 2. In the middle of this chapter, Paul opposes Peter—who’s also known as Cephas—because when people came from Jerusalem who were Christian Jewish leaders, Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles. He started implying that they needed to do something extra. They needed to be circumcised in order to be fully acceptable to God and fully accepted in God’s community.

Can you imagine going to a fellowship meal in our gym and an elder of this church stands up and publically, over the microphone, rebukes another elder for getting out of step with the gospel? That’s what happens here in Galatians 2. Paul basically says, “Peter, shame on you for giving the appearance that salvation comes through Jesus plus anything else. No, Peter.” He publically opposes him to his face. Thankfully, Peter repents and goes on to be a very faithful apostle of the Lord Jesus. He writes letters that we have in the Scriptures. But if Peter could get out of step, so can we.

Paul then goes on to describe what justification by grace through faith alone means in Galatians 2:15-20:

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

¹⁷ But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul has just said we’re justified by faith in Christ, not by the works of the law—we live by faith in Christ. Now he goes for the jugular in verse 21. If we add anything of our own works to faith in Christ, here is the effect: *“I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.”* If salvation is by faith plus something else,

Paul says we make the grace of God null and void. We're effectively saying there is no reason Christ really needed to die on the cross. That's how seriously Paul takes this doctrine of faith alone.

It's one thing to know the doctrine; it's another thing to live it out. If Peter could get out of step with that in the way he lived, so can I and so can you. If we take Paul's words in Galatians 1:6 seriously, it can happen with astonishing quickness. It's like there's a strong current trying to pull us away from *Sola Fide*. Like there's a strong gravitational field in this world that is strongly opposed to the gravity of the gospel. And there is in each of us something called the flesh that wants to live independently of God. We resist the truth that we're so utterly sinful that we can do absolutely nothing to save ourselves—nothing. It's so bad I needed the Son of God to die on that cross for me. The flesh resists that.

We also have an enemy—the devil—who wants to instill fear and a sense of insecurity in our hearts. “Will God really accept me just because I trust in Jesus? Don't I have to trust in some of my own stuff, just for a little bit of insurance?” There's a strong pull away from trusting in God's grace through faith in Christ alone. We want to add something more and when our hearts are in that mode of trying to add to the gospel, it can get pretty ugly.

You know you're deviating from grace alone through faith alone when you see certain symptoms, just like you know you're getting sick when you have a sore throat and a fever. You can see these symptoms when you find yourself really critical of other people and other Christians, or when you feel in your heart a tremendous amount of insecurity, thinking, “Does God really accept me? Does He really love me?” This can be detected when you feel pride in your devotions, your church attendance and your religious activity, or when you condemn other people and harbor attitudes toward them if they're not right on everything like baptism, Bible translations, the age of the earth, church government, spiritual gifts, rules about eating and drinking and movie watching, or even how they educate their children and engage with culture and politics.

If you're judging other people on these things, these are symptoms that you're not really believing that God accepts you by His grace and through faith in Jesus alone, such as:

- You distance yourself from those with whom you disagree
- you can't handle any criticism

- you keep a tight rein on everything and everyone in your life because you're afraid of God's displeasure if you don't do everything just right
- you can't relax, rejoice, sing and be glad.

When this happens, the aqueduct of faith is getting cluttered with a bunch of sewage.

Paul knows this our tendency and he hears the distrust of our hearts. He knows how easily we deviate from grace alone through faith in Christ alone. So he really tells it like it is in Galatians 3. Look at how he opens this chapter: "*O foolish Galatians!*" Aren't you glad I don't open sermons by saying, "O foolish New Covenanters"? I love the way the English gentleman J.B. Phillips paraphrased this verse. He said, "O you dear idiots. Who has bewitched you?" He's using the language of black magic here. "It's like a spell has been cast over you." "*It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.*" These guys are far away from Jerusalem. They didn't see the crucifixion.

Paul is saying that the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit is so powerful, so persuasive, it's as if you are seeing Christ being crucified before your very eyes when that gospel message penetrates your heart. You trusted in Christ—and now you're deviating. He says in verse two, "*Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*"

Paul is saying, "You started in Christ alone and that's how you received the Spirit. It wasn't because of anything you did. Do you think now that you're going to be better and more acceptable to God because you add in some work, like circumcision or like being baptized in a certain way or taking the Lord's Supper? Do you think these things, or your personal devotions and disciplines, are going to make you more acceptable to God? No. It's foolish.

He continues in verse four: "*Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?*" I love the present tense there. Then he goes back to that famous verse in Genesis 15:6: "*Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.*" Our father Abraham was justified by faith, Paul is saying.

*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.
And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by
faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you*

shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Paul is saying to the Galatians, “The way forward in the Christian life is the same as the way into the Christian life.” How did you become a Christian? You heard the gospel. You saw Christ crucified through the eyes of faith. You believed. You received righteousness by faith in Him. That’s how you became a Christian.

How do you move forward as a Christian? It’s the same way. You hear God’s Word, His gospel. You see God portrayed in His grace and goodness and glory in the Word. You believe it. You receive. That’s how you move forward in the Christian life. It’s all through the gift of the Holy Spirit Whom God supplies to those who believe. This is the same way Abraham entered into a right relationship with God. It was while he was still a Gentile, before he was circumcised. He heard the promise of God, he believed in God Who made the promise and his faith was counted to him as righteousness.

This is the way of blessing, Paul says—through faith alone—and any other way is under a curse. Look at Galatians 3:10:

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree,” so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

Did you hear Habakkuk 2:4 and Leviticus 18:5 quoted in there?

To be under God’s curse means you’ve got a death sentence from God hanging over your head. God rejects, condemns and sentences to eternal death all who are under this curse. And what characterizes those who are under the curse? It’s in verse ten: they rely on works of the law. It doesn’t say that those who obey God’s law are under a curse. It says those who rely on their obedience and observance of the law are under the curse. There’s no question that those who are godly should obey God’s law. The questions that should be asked are why do you obey, how do you obey and who gets the credit for your obedience. If you are relying on the law, it’s like you’re bartering with God, saying, “My morality, God, in exchange for Your mercy.” It’s an attempt to claim merit before God so that you can get blessings from Him in exchange for your goodness.

Paul is saying if you're thinking that somehow God's going to accept you because of something you're doing, because you're better than most people, then you're under a curse. It's impossible for sinful people like you and me to keep the whole law of God. You can't do it. If you're relying on works of the law, Paul is saying you'd better score 100% on that exam. Since that is the standard, Paul concludes in verse 11, "*It is evident that no one is justified before God by the law.*" No one.

Some time ago I heard someone illustrate this—I can't remember who, but they said this: Do you know how many miles it is between Los Angeles and Honolulu? 2,558.3 miles. Now imagine some very eccentric, wealthy man making an offer. "I will give one million dollars to any person who can swim from L.A. to Honolulu. The rules are simple. You get in the water. You can't get out until you reach Waikiki Beach. You can't stop, rest or have anyone assist you along the way. No electronics or mechanical devices can help you. You've got to swim straight through, without stopping. And if you do, I'll give you a million dollar—tax free—at the end. If you don't make it or you break the rules, you get zip." Who's going to sign up for that? It's absurd, right? I mean, I'd love the million bucks, but no way. I can't do it.

Well, the day arrives and no one shows up. So the man is standing up there and says, "Okay, I'll give ten million dollars." Still no takers. Finally he says, "The prize will be one hundred million, tax free, upon arrival, plus a condo on Waikiki Beach." Now that's enticing. So 10,000 people say, "Okay. Let's do it." The gun sounds and they hit the water. At 200 yards, a few people are already turning back because they can't swim and they can't touch the bottom anymore.

Five miles into the race, others start dropping out because they see sharks. At the 20-mile mark, there are only 150 swimmers left. At 50 miles, ten are still making their way through that ocean. At the 100-mile mark, the helicopter only sees five swimmers still in the water. They start waving for help a couple miles later. Finally, one woman is left—an Olympic swimmer, a gold medalist—and she continues for an amazing 215 miles into the ocean. When she finally succumbs and is pulled into the boat, she says to the rich man, "I deserve that money, because I lasted longer than anyone else." He refuses her.

Then she says, "Well, at least give me the portion of the money representing the distance I swam." He still refuses, citing the rules of the competition. It was all or nothing. And even though she swam much farther than anyone else, do you know how many miles were still left to Waikiki Beach? 2,343.3 miles. She was not even close.

“All who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” You can’t even get close to that standard. But praise God, there’s a way for God’s curse to be lifted and for blessing to be poured out on you. Paul tells us the way in Galatians 3:13: *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”*

Martin Luther pictures Jesus on the cross and he hears the Father saying to Jesus, “Be Thou Peter, the denier. Be Thou Paul, the blasphemer, the persecutor, the insolent opponent. Be Thou David, the adulterer. Be Thou Adam and Eve, those rebels in the Garden who had everything I gave them, yet they disobeyed My voice.”

There at the cross, God the Father plunges Jesus, His Son, into the cesspool of the filth of all our sins. He bears the curse for us—why? Verse 14, *“So that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”* This is the way in—and it’s the way forward in the Christian life.

Never take the “sola” out of “fide”

Our application today is simple: never take the “sola” out of “fide.” Never take the “alone” out of “faith.” Never allow yourself to be deceived into thinking that there’s something you need to do in order to secure your acceptance before God.

You know, if I were an enemy of the gospel—and I’m not—I would very much want to turn Christianity into a “do” religion instead of a “done” religion. I would very much want to keep people very insecure, wondering if they can be accepted by God, because they’re feeling like they don’t measure up. I would want to take everyone’s gaze off of what Jesus has done on that cross.

Paul understands how much of a battle this is. I want you to just see how he brings his letter to a crescendo in Galatians 5:1: *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”* Don’t let anyone take the “sola” out of “fide.” Don’t let anyone make you think that there’s something you need to do. *“Look: I, Paul, say to you, that if you accept circumcision,”* that was the battle in that day, *“Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law”*—100%. *“You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.”*

Some people worry, “If it’s really salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone, doesn’t that mean that everyone’s just going to live a shoddy, careless, disobedient life?” This next verse proves that that’s not the case. Verse six: *“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor*

uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.” Faith working through love. Faith unites you to Christ, Who gives you the Holy Spirit, Who moves you to turn from a life of depending on yourself, a life of sin and the works of the flesh that are described later on in this chapter.

You repent of those works of the flesh and walk by the Spirit, then He fills you now with all this wonderful harvest of fruit—beginning with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control Against such things there is no law(Galatians 5:22-23). . Faith unites you to Christ, fillings you with His Spirit. So faith in Christ alone never remains alone. It always results in a harvest of good works. But it’s all through Christ. John Calvin said that if Christ is not all to you, He will be of no value to you at all.

So as we come to the Lord’s Table, I want us to confess Galatians 6:14, that Christ and His cross are all to us. I want us not to think only about what a heavy weight our sins are, but I also want us to think about what a heavy weight our righteousness and our goodness can be. I want you to think not just about repenting and turning away from sin, but also I want you to think about repenting and turning away from your own righteousness, your own goodness, from trusting in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray that Galatians 6:14 would be true in our lives: *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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