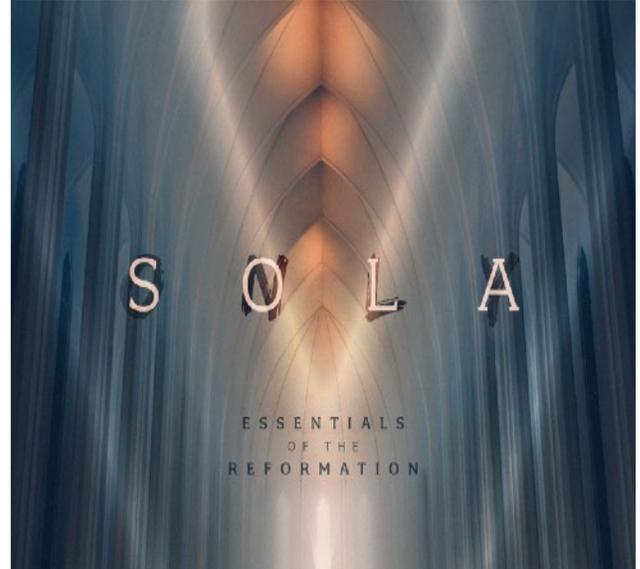


“An October Classic”

(Sola #3)

Romans 3: 21- 26 (The Message)

²¹⁻²⁴ But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.



²⁵⁻²⁶ God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it’s *now*—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

Reflection on the Word:

1. What has been added which is new?
2. How did Jesus set things right for us?
3. What is the “pure gift”?
4. How is this pure gift at work now and why did Paul want the believers in Rome to know that it was now?

Family Time or Small Group (Better Together) Discussion:

1. Do you have a story of grace that you are willing to share?
2. How is grace more than a cry for help?
3. Why do we try to put limits on grace? What does this say about our understanding of God’s grace?
4. What can a grace filled church look like? How about a grace filled world?
5. How can I pray for you?

The Sermon:

We are going to talk about grace today.

Everybody knows about grace, right? It's what you say or sometimes say before you eat ... although did you know that the Quakers, a Christian movement from the 17th Century, well, they wait to say "grace" after they eat. And for some meals, that may not be a bad idea!

I need a little help in digesting that second helping or that fifth slice of pizza Lord.

I'm sure that no one here has ever prayed words like that ... asking God for a little bit of help after too much pizza, too much food, or too much of doing something that you know you shouldn't have done in the first place. When it truly is too much, don't we cry out to the Lord for help? And doesn't that cry for help also include a self-imposed limit?

O Lord help me get over this indigestion and I promise I will stop at four slices. Maybe three?

A cry for help ...

A self-imposed limit ...

I thought that we were talking about grace ...

We are ... and I know and you know too ... that there is more to "grace" than a prayer offered before or after a meal. But I'm not sure that we know that grace is **not** a cry for help. Grace is **not** the song we sing when tragedy erupts. While we may find comfort in the tune and the words, it is **not** why grace is amazing. Grace is **not** something that we can place a limit on. Grace is **not** something we own.

So, what then is grace?

Let me tell you a story.

It's October and while pumpkins need to be carved, leaves begin to change colors and fall to the earth, baseball crowns a champion. I grew up such a long time ago ... a time when the Baltimore Orioles were good and contenders for a championship ... a time when you would come home from school, toss your books onto the bed, grab your glove, bat, ball, and go outside.

Someone would be named team captains and the picking of teams would start. Then the game. But you should know that I grew up in the *city suburbs*. *City suburbs* because it wasn't really city but it wasn't the suburbs either. We didn't have any fields. Just a street that T boned into a cul-de-sac. The street was appropriately named Center Road. The cul-de-sac had five large, all stone houses.

Chris' house was to the right. Chris had 5 brothers and 3 sisters. There was always something going on at Chris' house. His mom was always cooking spaghetti or hotdogs. I always found that both delicious and odd at the same time. Odd because they were Irish. Delicious because who in their right mind doesn't like spaghetti and hot dogs! Yum! And when dinner at the Craig house wasn't good, guess whose house I ate at?

The neighbors were never really that friendly to Chris' family. Chris' siblings were often in trouble and doing things that were so cool but a tad dangerous and ... destructive.

I forgot to mention where I lived. I lived in the apartments just up the road. People in large stone houses don't usually associate with apartment people. That's what I experienced.

Back to the game ...

Teams were picked and there was a problem. In the street there was a parked car. It was a nice Cadillac car. And it was parked at the stone house where Rommel lived. Rommel was a large white German Shepherd who was the scariest dog in the entire neighborhood. We all thought that Rommel ate children for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

But sometimes you must face your fears and the game must be played.

So, the Cadillac became first base and if you hit the Cadillac, it was an automatic out. We were respectful and the deterrent of an automatic out was more than enough to hit away from the Cadillac. But we didn't think about ...

There I was out in shallow centerfield. I was the second baseman and the centerfielder. My two favorite positions. Brian was up to bat. Brian wasn't the fastest kid but if he ever hit the ball it could go past the infield.

There's the pitch.

The swing ...

Help me with my story. I need you to give some background music. I think Chariots of Fire music is appropriate here ([hum the Chariots of Fire music and have the congregation join in](#)).

The swing ...

The doink.

Brian breaks out of the batter's box. It's a one hop line drive to centerfield.

It went perfectly into my glove. The momentum carried my glove to my right hand. And there was Chris at first base urging me to make the throw of a lifetime. And boy did I ever.

That throw went right through that back window of that Cadillac. Never seen anything like it in all my life. Right through. Somehow it bounced off the steering wheel right into the passenger seat. And Chris opened the passenger door. He got the ball, and he tagged his brother Brian out. You know, if Sports Center would have been around it would have made a top play and I'd have an Espy award.

There's also this ... just as the ball went through the back window of the Cadillac, hitting the steering wheel and going into the front passenger seat ... just as Chris opened the door ... retrieved the ball and

tagged his brother ... just as all of that was happening ... Rommel's family came out the front door. They saw it all. And we ... we ran like the wind.

After tagging his brother, Chris threw the ball so that Rommel would chase it and he bolted. I ran back into my apartment and jumped into bed. All I could think of was the trouble I was going to be in. As I was thinking ... I also wondered ... maybe they didn't see me. Maybe they only saw Chris.

Sure enough ... only him. They didn't believe his story that it was me. His mom made a boatload of spaghetti for Rommel and his family. Chris was grounded for two weeks. But I was free.

I know what you are thinking ... **is this grace?**

Someone taking your place? Someone getting the blame ... the grounding when it was all on you?

There's a little bit more to the story.

It was my ball. We played that afternoon with my ball. And now, Rommel had my ball.

I know that common sense would tell you to just get another ball but that was my one and only ball. It was valuable to me. Apartment kids can usually afford only one ball and so, I worked up courage and I went to Rommel's house. Knocked on the door and asked for my ball back.

Mrs. Zeider called for Rommel, and he turned the corner with my ball in his mouth. He had chewed the heck out of it. She commanded Rommel to give it to me and he placed it at my feet and then went a short distance away. His tail wagging. He wanted to play catch. *"He wants to play catch with you. Why don't you play out in the yard! I will watch."*

I played catch with the fiercest dog in the neighborhood. We became friends. And speaking of friends, I saw Chris watching from his window. I just couldn't take it anymore. And so, I confessed it all to Mrs. Zeider and the funny thing, she knew. She knew it all and told me that from his corner apartment, Mr. DeCarlo had seen it all.

"Figures," I said, "Mr. DeCarlo is always yelling at Chris and me."

Mrs. Zeider stopped me in my thoughts. She went on to tell me more. "Mr. DeCarlo saw it all, but he vouched for you boys. He said that you were good boys. Just a little bit mischievous at times. He then gave me a check to cover the expense of the window. You might want to thank him."

Indeed, I did.

Is this grace?

When I thanked Mr. DeCarlo, he asked me, "where's Chris?" I think he knew but just in case I told him that Chris was grounded. He then asked me, "That's not right, is it?" I agreed but told him that Chris' mom would never believe me.

"Are you hungry? I hear Chris' mom makes some mighty tasty spaghetti for an Irish woman. Let this Italian man be the judge and let's bail Chris out. What say you?"

I say this is grace. Larger than what we can put into words. Bigger than what we can describe. Larger than what we can comprehend. Greater than what we see. The very essence of our lives as Christians and the needed **gospel ... the Good News of salvation ...** that the world needs to hear.

“God sets things right and by his grace and grace alone, he makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.” What say you ... about grace? What is your story?

Thought for the Week Ahead:

“The grace of God has found space in my life in the empty, hollowed- out spaces in my heart, not in the parts of my life that I have managed to fill up with my own ‘achievements.’”

— Margaret Silf