Singled Out by Grace

It would be a mistake: if I told you this morning about how many people there are who need to hear the gospel, if I told you about what you must do to help them, if I told you what you must tell them, if I told you how you can do it and warned you what will happen if you don’t. It would be a mistake if I told you all that but did not tell you about grace - not merely as a concept, not as something that you must tell others about - but as something that is yours, something that singles you out. 1. Singles you out for salvation. 2. And singles you out for a purpose.

Do you ever feel lost in the crowd? Like you aren’t that important, just a very small person in a very large world? Or like no one really sees you, no one understands - just another face, just another name?

We live in a world that is constantly trying to tell you the opposite. They say “You are special. You are unique. You be you.” But doesn’t it all sound kind of hollow? When everyone in the world is so focused on being different, don’t they kind of all end up being the same? And really, no matter what you do, at bottom, aren’t you really just like everyone else? Sure you have different tastes, you might like broccoli while I don’t, you might like the vikings while I like the packers, but notice what is the same. We both care about the thing we like and not so much about the thing we don’t. Because at bottom, we are the same. We care about me. You might be good at writing and I might be good at talking. But don’t we both probably think that the thing we are good at is better?

You and I make the same excuses about our sins. “Oh it was his fault.” “Oh she started it.” “Oh you’ve got to see it from my perspective!” But how often do you actually see it from someone else’s? You and I procrastinate in the same ways. “I can always pray later.” “I can always share the gospel next time.” “I can always take out the garbage or clean up the kitchen tomorrow, right now I’d really just like to do whatever it is I want.” “I deserve some ‘me time.’” We all tell ourselves the same lies and comfort ourselves with the same false hopes. And we, none of us, really like to be singled out - depending on what it is anyway. We love to be singled out for praise, for credit, but not to be blamed, not for our sins. Say you were driving on the highway, going ten over the speed limit just like everyone else. But only you got pulled over and only you got a ticket. I think I know what you’d think. It wouldn’t be “Well I deserved that,” but “Why me? Why did I get singled out?”

All such excuses will and must die before God, your Judge. In the law you are indeed singled out. You cannot melt into the crowd. You cannot compare with anyone else. That won’t fly. And as a result you do end up sort of melting into the crowd - just like everyone else. So that the Apostle Paul could lump you together with all of humanity and say, “They are all the same. There is no one who does good. No one who seeks after God.” The law both singles you out for every sin and then lumps you together with all the rest saying, “You’re just another sinner.” The gospel tells a different story. Jesus tells a different story.

In His story, you are never just a face, never just another sheep, never just another lost sinner. That’s the point of this parable. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go and find the one. It’s not because he doesn’t care about the ninety-nine. It’s because He cares so personally, so singly for the one. The shepherd knows His sheep. The savior knows you. He knows where you are. He knows how you struggle. He knows all of your sins. He knows them all so well because He bore them for you. That was how He came and found you. He came to the cross. There the Shepherd died for sheep that loved to wander. There He became sin in your place. He became the one who had done everything that you have ever done wrong. He became the one, the only one, singled out by God in wrath so that you would be singled out in mercy and grace. As He died there, it was not His life that flashed before His eyes, it was yours. It was you. He didn’t just see a massive crowd that no one could number, He saw each one of you. And you were His joy. You still are. For He lives! He comes to you still. He knows every trouble, every temptation, every danger. He sees you. He sees when you go astray and He searches for you by Word and Sacrament. You are singled out in grace - singled out for salvation.

And this must be the basis of any discussion about mission work - the singularity of God’s grace to you. Because this gives you purpose.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed but there are a lot of superhero movies out these days. They tend to share a few things in common. One of them is what is known as an “origin story.” That is, how did this previously ordinary person come to have such superhuman powers? Take spiderman - He gets bitten by a radioactive spider and as a result, naturally, he can shoot webs from his arms, climb on the sides of walls, and jump super far. You have an origin story too. It’s what we have just mentioned, that you were singled out by grace. See, you aren’t the superhero in this story. That would be Jesus - Jesus, Who saves you. And yet what He has done for you should bring you to ask not, “why me? (in annoyance)” but “why me? (in wonder)” and “what purpose does this give?” In the movies, superheroes often wrestle with those questions. “Why did this happen to me? Why was I given this ability?” Inevitably, they end up trying to save the world. They say things like, “With great power comes great responsibility.” It’s the same with you. With great grace comes great purpose.

Because in the same way that God singled you out in love, so He has done for every person in the world. In the same way that He died personally for you, so he died for every soul. In the same way that He went searching to find you, longing to bring you home on his shoulders, so He longs and searches for every lost lamb, for every sad sinner, for every confused and darkened heart.

He wants to find them and He uses you to do it. You are the body of Christ. You are His hands and arms and feet and fingers. He has chosen to work through you in this world. He has chosen to use your lips to speak His Word. He has chosen to send you to find the ones lost in the cold.

It is only grace that gives you this purpose. The law cannot make you share the gospel, the law cannot make you search for the sinner or rejoice when Jesus carries him home. That’s why the pharisees and scribes grumbled in our text. It’s an ongoing theme in Luke’s gospel. Every time some sinner comes to Jesus, they complain. “Why’s he eating with that guy?” “Doesn’t he know who she is?” This is what happens when hearts are not trained by grace. This is the way we think when we think we are our own heroes, our own saviors. When you think you are good enough, that you are better, at least better than some, it makes you think, not, “Why not me?” but “why them?” It leaves you cold and empty: no faith, no love, no joy. If you ever find it hard to be motivated to share the gospel, if you ever find that you don’t much care about whether lost sinners come to repent, this is why. It’s because you are forgetting grace.

Grace is not for those who think they’re already righteous, but for the lost, for the wretched, for the sinner - for you! Grace singles you out. Grace gives you love. Grace gives you joy. Grace opens your lips and widens your heart!

Consider Paul. He speaks about this in our epistle reading. Was there any greater missionary than Paul? Anyone who had such zeal for souls? Anyone besides the savior himself who cared so deeply and did so much and worked so hard to find the lost?

And was there anyone ever who understood or valued God’s grace more than Paul? If you were to think of some of your favorite passages about grace, I bet the bulk of them came from Paul’s pen. He’s the one who said, “Chief of sinners though I be.” He wrote, by inspiration, “We are justified by faith apart from the works of the law,” and, “God’s grace towards me was not in vain,” and, “By grace you are saved through faith.” Paul knew. Because Paul had been lost. And Paul had been found. Paul had been singled out. Now Paul found others. Paul found his salvation and his purpose only in the grace of Christ.

So do you. You don’t need to be a pastor. You don’t need to be a great speaker or energetic leader. You don’t need to go to other countries. You just need grace. You just need His Word. There’s people all around - right here, in this town, in your neighborhoods.

So just save one. There’s a scene in this superhero movie about the Justice League. You know the Justice League is all the DC superheroes like Batman, Superman, Aquaman, Wonder Women etc coming together to battle some supercharged enemy.. In one scene, the Flash is getting ready to fight alongside the other superheroes but he’s kind of nervous about it. He’s never actually fought before. Usually all he does is run really fast and grab people before something bad happens to them. So Batman tells him, “Just save one.” “Just save one and then you’ll see.” For those superheroes who felt such a sense of purpose it could be quite overwhelming to see all kinds of people in need of help. You could be paralyzed by the feeling that you could never save them all. Instead, just save one.

You - take Batman’s advice, take the Shepherd’s example, and do the same thing. There’s a whole world of people out there who are lost, a whole world in the dark, a whole world that needs to be saved. You can’t save them all. And it’s not up to you to do so. You just save one. Think of one person from your life, one person from your family, one person at work, one old college friend, one neighbor, one person that never knew Jesus at all or used to but has gone away. Pick one person and follow Jesus’ example. Go out to find them. Pray for them - every day. Be there for them. Love them. Look for ways to share the word with them. And don’t stop. Don’t give up. Single them out in grace. Think of the illustration Jesus is using. I’m sure it’s happened to you. You couldn’t find something you needed. And the amount of time you spent looking, the amount of energy you put into it was directly related to how important it was to you. When I can't find the remote, I look for a little while, then give up and use my phone to control the tv instead. When I can’t find my phone, I just have someone call it. If I can’t find my keys in the morning, I’m not going anywhere till I find them. What if what was lost was your own child? What wouldn’t you do to find her? That’s what Jesus is saying here. If a shepherd will leave the ninety-nine to find one, if a woman will sweep out her whole house to find a coin, what won’t and what hasn’t God done to find you? To what lengths then should we go, you and I, to find others - even just one?

Now if this all seems like too much of a burden, remember that it isn’t really your burden to bear. I said “just save one.” but it isn’t really you that saves them. Jesus uses you as his hands and mouth just as He used Paul. But it’s really Jesus doing the finding. He’s the shepherd seeking His sheep. He’s the hero. He’s the one who singled you out in His grace. And He’s the one who singled you out for this purpose. It’s a purpose He has well equipped you for. Because all you really need is His grace.

It is that grace which gives you the desire to tell others. It is that grace which strengthens you when you are troubled or sad because you have failed, or they just won’t listen. It is that grace which can save others like it saved you. It is that grace which gives the great joy which Jesus mentioned in the text. Whenever Christ saves just one sinner, what joy there is - what joy in heaven - what joy among the angels - what joy among us, His people - an eternal joy in Jesus and His singular grace! A grace that singled you out for salvation and singles you out for a purpose. Amen.