

**Secrets of Abundant Living
The Secret of Grace**

Ephesians 2:1-10

We are saved by grace through faith for good works.

A sermon preached by
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Do you remember while playing on the playground and your best friend would come running singing, “I know a secret, I know a secret!” Your friend would taunt you claiming to never tell you, or better yet, for you to guess.

Today we continue our series on the secret to abundant living, last week we heard the value of constant learning and today we are going to talk about the secret of grace. As United Methodist...this is really the key to what sets us apart from other denominations...our theology of grace.

John Wesley started the Methodist movement after having an encounter with the Holy Spirit in his small group Bible study when his heart as he described it was “strangely warmed.” From that point on, Methodism made significant contributions to the Christian faith in the 18th century. It was the first to emphasize weekly Bible study in a small group as foundational to your spiritual growth. Methodists sought to provide education for the working class poor so they could have better opportunities in life. Methodism has started more schools and colleges than any other denomination. Amidst all of this was Wesley’s contribution to the theology or beliefs of the faith, especially about grace.

Grace for Methodists is understood as a three-stage process: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. That being said, we need to understand that grace is just that, grace. Prevenient grace, justifying grace and sanctifying grace are not three different types of grace, they are 3 different experiences of the same grace based on our circumstances and our response. Grace is available to us throughout our spiritual journey, but at different stages it accomplishes different things and evokes different responses.

So what is grace? God’s grace is unmerited love and forgiveness and it is free for all. God’s grace does not depend upon our good works in order for us to receive it. We cannot earn God’s grace I think we sometimes believe God is like Santa Claus. We believe that if we’re good enough then we’ll get presents or blessings. The good news is that God is not Santa, watching and keeping a record of who’s naughty or who’s nice. God loves us, and there is nothing you can do to

make God love you any more or any less than God loves you right now.

That can be a difficult thing for us to get a handle on, especially in our culture today. We live in a culture that is overwhelmingly biased to the belief that we only get what we deserve, and if we just work hard enough, rewards will follow. We learn it from an early age. Be good and you'll get a surprise and presents. Study hard, and you'll get good grades. Work hard, and you'll get ahead in life. Everywhere we turn, there's a hoop that we have to jump through to receive the promised reward. That is completely the opposite with God. God's grace is a free gift that cannot be earned. Our faith is the only condition through which we receive God's grace.

Yet too often we try to earn God's grace. United Methodist Bishop Reuben Job writes, "If we are just good enough, do enough, deny ourselves enough, we will be forgiven, redeemed, and reconciled to God. Following this path brings no peace, assurance, or sense of companionship with God. Rather than asking why we are miserable and have no deep peace and joy in our relationship with God, we just try harder to earn our way to companionship with God. We do this through busyness in the church, prayer, or acts of compassion in the world. We are led to believe that if we work hard enough, salvation will be ours. But the biblical view of life is quite different and John Wesley, grounded as he was in the Bible, was certain that salvation was not for sale. He was convinced that no one could ever earn a place at God's table... We can never justify ourselves, be reconciled to God or earn our way to heaven on our own. But the marvelous good news is that God offers it all to us as a gift. We are saved, in this world and the next, by grace through faith."

This is the foundation of the Christian faith which sets us apart from every other world religion, including Judaism, salvation by faith alone. There is nothing that we can do to become deserving of salvation. It is only through God's grace and our response of faith. Our salvation is not brought about simply by living a Christian way of life. It is brought about through faith and faith alone.

God's grace is free for everyone. This was a profound statement for Wesley who was combating Christians in his day who believed in election and predestination that God has already ordained or chosen some to receive salvation and the rest were condemned to hell. Wesley drew on John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life." Everyone, not some, not the good, not those who do great things but everyone. Jesus Christ died for all of humanity, and therefore, everyone is offered the grace Jesus made available through his death on the cross.

Why do we need grace? You first have to go back to the beginning of time. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God's law, sin entered the world and their lives. From that time on, sin has been passed on from one generation to another, thus making us inclined toward sin. This has created a continual battle within us between the spirit and the flesh. This is the doctrine of Original Sin. Sin entered the world because God has given us the freedom to choose, His will or ours. When God seeks to redeem us through his grace, it is nevertheless clear in Scripture and human experience that we have the freedom to choose. This is the doctrine of free will. We have been given the ability to say yes to God or to say no. It is our choice. The problem is that sin has so gripped our lives, we cannot say yes to God.

Jaymalis Davis, a young man incarcerated, who lived a life surround by drugs, crime and unemployment. His mother was a drug addict and largely absent from his home and his father, who was in and out of jail for drugs and car theft and whom he didn't know, was murdered. He was kicked out of a school which specialized in shepherding disadvantaged kids to college and ended up in home confinement for a knife point robbery over an iPod. In an interview Jaymalis said, "I know how to stay out of trouble....I (just) be making some crazy decisions."

And that's the effect of sin in our lives. We may know what is good but we are inclined toward sin and crazy decisions, stuck in a cycle of continually making the wrong decisions, choosing our way rather than God's.

Yet it is in the midst of all of this that God still chose to love us.

That leads us to prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is God's move toward us. If 'prevenient' is too difficult a word to remember, think of it as "preceding" grace. It is grace that precedes a decision for God. It is God working in our lives before we know God or recognize that it's God who is loving us. Prevenient or preceding grace is God making the first move toward us, not us moving toward God.

John Wesley likened prevenient grace to that of God wooing us. Before there is any connection or feelings of love, God is present in our life loving us, whispering in our lives and our soul through both word and action, "I love you!" He is wooing us to respond to His love and enter a relationship with Him.

The problem is we are corrupted by the effects of sin and that prevents us from responding to God's love and grace. So prevenient grace breaks the grip sin has on our lives by empowering us to choose the salvation offered by God in Jesus Christ. It is this offer of grace from God and our recognition of God's love for us and of our sin which moves us to repentance. Prevenient grace awakens us, in a spiritual sense, to the need for forgiveness. It's like the first light of dawn allowing us to see the hand of God and to reach for it. While prevenient grace is given to all people, it can still be resisted because of free will. You cannot be forced to love someone. And God wants us to make the choice to love Him in response to His love and grace.

If we say "yes" to God, then we experience justifying grace. Literally, justification means, "declared to be blameless," as in a court of law. But the law we have broken is God's will. Justification, at its root, is about pardon and the forgiveness of our sins when we profess our faith in Jesus and accept God in our lives. Our text this morning speaks to the process of justification. The writer of Ephesians tells us how we were dead through the sins in which we once lived, following the course of this world and the desires of flesh, and so we were by nature children of rebellion, like everyone else.

But God, who has limitless grace, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our sins, made us alive together with Christ. Then the writer says that it is by grace that we have been saved through faith, and this reality is not of our own doing; it is the gift of God. It's not the result of our works, but God's work in Jesus.

The first step is realizing that without God's grace active in our lives, we are simply dead in our sinfulness. That idea of death comes from the ancient Jewish understanding that we were created for relationship with God and that any sin in our lives separates us from God. Thus, we are as good as dead because there is no way with sin and its effect of separation from God that we then can live the life that God intended. And so what happens is that we start out following the patterns of the world, paying attention to our own desires and choosing to do our will rather than God's which by its very definition is sin. And while we are in the midst of our sinful lives and still dead through our trespasses, God has made us alive in Christ.

We do not need to be holy already in order to be justified. In fact, it is while we are still mired in sin that grace comes to us. So it is actually impossible to be holy before we are justified, since our holiness comes from being justified by God in the first place. John Wesley put it this way, "It is not a saint but a sinner that is forgiven, and under the notion of a sinner."

John Wesley writes, "Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself;' but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me and gave himself for me." When we are justified through faith, our sins are not only forgiven by God but forgotten as well. As the Psalmist writes, "As far as the East is from the West, so far removed are our sins from us." This means we are given the opportunity to be liberated not just from the power of the sin in our lives, but also from the guilt of our sin. As hard as it is to actually put into practice, God says to us that we no longer need to carry around the weight of our guilt for the things we have done wrong. And this is what truly brings God's peace – a peace that passes all understanding. God offers us the ability

to stand before Him with a clean conscience, because God's justifying grace erases not just our sin, but our guilt as well.

God's grace is an invitation and that invitation is for us today. Our invitation to a life in Christ is to respond to God's offer of love and forgiveness for us, to turn toward God in faith, whether it be for the first time or for the 100th. To cast aside not just the sin in our lives, but also the guilt that we carry around as a result of that sin. No matter who you are or what you've done, you are loved, your life does matter and each one of us is redeemable, and that today we may begin living a life in God's grace. The invitation is extended to you now. As Wesley said to his followers many years ago, "Why not this hour, this moment" accept God's grace and forgiveness in your life. We are offered grace to receive it. But we are not just to be recipients of grace, we are meant to be purveyors of grace, givers of grace in the lives of other people.

Yesterday I attended an Alumni Board meeting at University of the Ozarks, where I graduated some 34 years ago. At the end of our meeting, the president of the Board shared this poem...and it seemed to sum up the secret of living an abundant life of grace.

I asked for strength, and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for wisdom, and God gave me problems to learn to solve.

I asked for prosperity, and God gave me a brain and brawn to work.

I asked for courage, and God gave me dangers to overcome.

I asked for love, and God gave me people to help.

I asked for favors, and God gave me opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted.

I received everything I needed.

May God's grace humble our hearts to realize just how much God loves us...undeserving as we may be, praise God for loving us fully and completely and may we love God the same.