

The theology and practice of United Methodists can be summarized with one word “GRACE.” John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, had a distinctive understanding of God’s saving grace. Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in salvation by grace. He, however, combined these many views in a powerful way which emphasizes “Grace” as a central to our understanding of Christian faith and life.

Grace can be defined as the love and mercy given to us by God because God wants us to have it, not because of anything we have done to earn it. We read in the letter to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

Our United Methodist heritage is rooted in a deep and profound understanding of God’s grace. This incredible grace flows from God’s great love for us. Did you have to memorize John 3:16 in Sunday school when you were a child? There was a good reason. This one verse summarizes the gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The ability to call to mind God’s love and God’s gift of Jesus Christ is a great resource for theology and faith.

John Wesley described God’s grace as threefold: (1) prevenient grace, (2) justifying grace, and (3) sanctifying grace.

Last Sunday, Pastor Luke shared with us the story of God’s Prevenient Grace. *Prevenient* means “comes before.” This tells us that God is actively present in our lives even before we realize God is with us. This presence is not dependent on any human actions or responses. It is a gift—a gift that is always available. God’s grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to God’s invitation to be in relationship with God. God takes the initiative in relating to humanity. We do not have to beg or plead for God’s love and grace. God actively seeks us! God loves us all and his love is available for all people. God invites everyone to be in a loving relationship with him without any restriction or condition. That is called *Prevenient Grace*.

Today we are here to explore the concept of “Justifying Grace” which is the grace that takes us one step beyond from “Prevenient Grace.” “Justifying Grace” is the grace of how we come to accept the relationship God offers. This relationship is based upon agape love, love which is self-sacrificial. John reminds us in 1 John 4 that God loves us so much that he sent Jesus in order that we might have eternal life through him.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth saying, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). And in his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul also wrote saying, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

These verses demonstrate the justifying grace of God. They point to reconciliation, pardon, and restoration. Through the work of God in Christ our sins are forgiven, and our relationship with God is restored. To be justified means to “be put right with God by grace through faith in Christ Jesus.” Justifying grace moves us to accept the gift of a living relationship with God as the number one priority in our lives.

What I devote my life to is my God. Either I am “my own Lord and God,” or Jesus is my Lord and God. Either I take charge of my life, set individual, personal priorities, and direct my interests; or I yield control of my life to Jesus Christ and let him set my priorities and direct my interests. Who is your God? You or Jesus Christ?

God initiates restoring our lost relationship with him, but each one of us is faced with a personal decision to accept or reject his offer. Just like Joshua, we must “choose this day whom we will serve...” Justifying grace is the grace that operates within us when we decide to accept the relationship God offers. It is the moment we say “yes” to God for the relationship he offers. When we say “yes” to God, our lives begin anew in grace. It is the moment we make changes in life by accepting Jesus to be our Lord and Savior.

I first experienced “Justifying Grace” in a Sunday school class when I was six years old. My Sunday school teacher, Mrs. Kim, was teaching about God’s love based on

John 3:16. She read the verse for the class first, and then she replaced the word, “World” and “everyone” with each person’s name in her scripture reading:

- John 3:16....“For God so loved ~~SUNNY the world~~ that he gave his only Son, so that ~~SUNNY everyone~~ who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

After that, she read Zephaniah 3:17 which told me that God is with me. His power gives me victory. He takes delight in me. He gives me new life in his love. He rejoices over me with singing. Later on, I learned this passage in Korean as a song. So, singing this passage in Korean reminds me of the moment I felt God’s loving presence for the first time. Here is the song....

(습 3:17) 너의 하나님 여호와가 너의 가운데 계시니, 그는 구원을 베푸실 전능자, 전능자이시라.
그가 너로 인하여 기쁨을 이기지 못하시며, 너를 잠잠히 사랑하시며,
즐거이 부르며 기뻐, 기뻐하시리라

(Zephaniah 3:17) The LORD your God is with you; his power gives you victory. The LORD will take delight in you, and in his love he will give you new life. He will sing and be joyful over you.

A justifying grace moment is an “A-ha” moment when I know that I am loved by God unconditionally. He rejoices over me with gladness. At this “A-ha” moment, I knew God’s love, not about God’s love. This love that I felt led me to ask Jesus to forgive me of my sins, come into my heart, and be my savior. I was justified by grace and became a child of God. God’s love that I felt changed me totally.

The justifying grace moment can be both instantaneous and progressive. It continues as God shows us new areas in our lives in which we must invite Jesus Christ to take charge and be our Lord. My walk with God at age 43 is not the same as my walk with God at age six, because my walk with him is not a once and for all experience but a joyous journey of growth. Step by step we come into a better understanding of ourselves and a more complete knowledge of the claims Christ places on our lives. Christianity is a life style we live by faith on a day-by-day, moment-by-moment basis.

We are justified when we are put right with God. This happens over and over until it becomes a way of life! Justifying grace continues to operate in our life as the Holy Spirit makes us aware at times that our relationship with the Lord falters. Like the Prodigal Son I have often strayed into the “far country” thinking I could take charge of my life and handle my struggles with my own strength and wisdom

apart from God. Like the Prodigal's Father, the Lord has always been waiting with open arms to welcome me home.

Many times over the years I have slipped and sinned. I praise God that his justifying grace has been there to pick me up one more time. When I confess, God always forgives. The hymn writer expresses it so well when he sings: "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." [August M. Toplady, "Rock of Ages," 1776]

In inviting us to become God's children the Holy Spirit appeals to our intellect. Faith is reasonable. It is not blind. God's desire is that we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God (Ephesians 4:13). Justifying grace at the same time speaks to our minds and appeals to our emotions. God wants us to respond to Christ but not to depend upon our feelings for the assurance of our salvation.

God does everything possible to lead us to accept his offer of love and forgiveness in Christ, but he does not dictate our response. We have a choice to make, to accept or reject Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The Lord Jesus personally invites each one of us as he did the Church at Laodicea in Revelation 3:20, "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends." The door at which Jesus stands and knocks is the door of each one of our hearts. He will never force his entrance. There is only one latch on the door of your heart and mine, and that is on the inside. God leaves that choice in our hands. We each must personally decide, "What shall I do then with Jesus who is called the Christ?"

Let me close the message with a story. The story goes like this...

[STORY] A woman came up to an evangelist after hearing him preach and said that she could not understand salvation. The evangelist asked, "Mrs. Brown, how long have you been Mrs. Brown?" "Why, ever since I was married," she replied. "And how did you become Mrs. Brown?" he asked. "When the minister said, 'Will you have this man to be your wedded husband,' I just said, 'Yes.'" "Didn't you say, 'I hope so,' or 'I'll try to?'" asked the evangelist. "No," she replied, "I said, 'I will.'" Then he said, "God is asking you if you will receive his Son as your Lord and Savior. What will you say to that?" Her face lit up, and she said, "How simple that is! Isn't it strange that I didn't say, 'Yes' long ago?"

Justifying grace calls for you to say, “Yes,” and God will receive you as you come to him by faith in Jesus Christ, but if you have not done so already, please don’t wait. Say “yes” to God’s offer in Jesus Christ now, and he will JUSTIFY you, accepting you just as if you had never been away from the loving relationship with God. What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark, no longer stings because Grace makes beauty out of ugly things once you accept it. The choice is yours.