

## WHAT WE BELIEVE

The United Methodist Church is a global denomination that opens hearts, opens minds and opens doors through active engagement with our world. The mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

John Wesley and the early Methodists placed primary emphasis on Christian living, on putting faith and love into action. This emphasis on what Wesley referred to as "practical divinity" has continued to be a hallmark of United Methodism today.

## THE WESLEYAN CONCEPT OF GRACE

The Bible teaches us that everything we have from God is given because of God's great love for us. "You are saved by God's grace because of your faith," Ephesians 2 reads. "This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of" (Ephesians 2:8-9 CEB).

United Methodists recognize God's grace at work throughout our spiritual journeys. John Wesley, the historic founder of the Methodist movement, wrote and preached about the role of God's grace to prepare us, redeem us, and continually shape us into the people we were created to be.

## GOD AT WORK BEFORE WE KNOW IT: PREVENIENT GRACE

When we consider the circumstances that led to us coming to faith in Jesus Christ, we begin to see the hand of God at work in our lives long before we were aware of the Spirit's presence. The Rev. Matt O'Reilly of St. Mark United Methodist Church, in Mobile, Alabama shares, "You never just wake up in the morning and say, 'Hey! I think I'm going to give my life to Jesus today,' because it was your idea."

Maybe you were fortunate enough to have parents who took you to church and taught you Bible stories when you were young. Maybe a high school friend invited you to her youth group where you felt a love and acceptance for which you longed. Maybe you hit rock bottom and your sponsor modeled the power of following Jesus in a way that you knew you needed. Maybe your marriage collapsed and a Christian friend who had been through something similar supported you during the most difficult days.

[John Wesley](#), the historical founder of the [Methodist movement](#), saw the grace of God at work in those moments. Those who showed you the healing, forgiveness, and restoration available by faith in Jesus Christ came to you by God's prevenient grace.

## Prevenient?

If you think using an arcane word like *prevenient* is a problem, Wesley's other favorite word for this season of grace was *preventing*—a word he used in the 1700s very differently than the way we use it today.

The words *prevenient* and *preventing* come from a Latin root word that means *to precede*. Prevenient or preventing grace then is simply the grace that comes before. Before what? [Justifying grace](#).

In *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*, Wesley uses the metaphor of a house to describe our spiritual journeys. Our justification by faith he calls the door. The conviction of our sin and recognition of our need for salvation, he likens to a porch.

Prevenient grace is the grace of the porch. It prepares our hearts and minds to hear and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to respond in faith.

“This grace convinces them of being sinners who need God for forgiveness,” explains the Rev. Nday Bondo Mwanabute, professor of theology at [Africa University](#), Mutare, Zimbabwe. “The Holy Spirit assists them to come to God and acknowledge God’s will and holiness.”

Wesley taught that God’s grace is available to everyone and not just a select few, as some of his contemporaries believed. Unfortunately, many resist God’s prevenient grace and never choose to come to Christ in faith to continue their spiritual journeys through the door of justification.

### **God at Work In Our Lives**

By describing this period as grace, we remind ourselves this is not something we do under our own power. It is, instead, a gift from God. “Without a doctrine of grace you are left trying to climb some sort of self-constructed ladder,” O’Reilly explains. “You’re left trying to live in such a way to earn God’s favor, and that’s depressing.”

When we understand it as grace, we acknowledge that God is acting in our lives long before we know it. The Bible puts it this way, “God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us” ([Romans 5:8](#)).

“I have this image of the circus and the trapeze artists,” explains the Rev. Gary Henderson of United Methodist Communications. “They’re doing these incredible things way up high and it’s dangerous. Life is like that... Through prevenience, we have a net available to us.”

By God’s grace, the Holy Spirit is present in our lives drawing us closer to Christ through the loving support of a friend, the modeling of faith by a parent, or a sermon that sounds like God speaking directly to us. When we are convicted of our sin and long to live a new life in Jesus Christ, we are justified by faith, another act of God’s loving grace in our lives.

### **BY GRACE WE ARE FORGIVEN: JUSTIFYING GRACE**

“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Many United Methodists know John Newton’s words so well that we can sing more than one verse of this great hymn from memory. We may be a little fuzzy, however, on the [concept of grace](#).

Newton’s lyrics echo those of scripture, like [Ephesians 2:8](#), “You are saved by God’s grace because of your faith. This salvation is God’s gift.” Both the Apostle Paul and the hymn writer teach us that our salvation is not something we earn or deserve. It comes to us because of God’s great love for us.

[John Wesley](#), the founder of the [Methodist movement](#), preached and wrote often about the amazing grace of God that leads us into renewed relationship with God.

## **The Gift of God**

The Rev. Matt O'Reilly, pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church, Mobile, Alabama, wants United Methodists to know that when we speak of the grace of God, we are not talking about a substance. It is instead a description of God at work in our lives.

"Grace is primarily about how God relates to us," O'Reilly teaches, "not based on our merit, but based on God's resolve and love for creatures made in God's image."

"Human effort does not play any role," shares the Rev. Nday Bondo Mwanabute, professor of theology at [Africa University](#), Mutare, Zimbabwe. "All that is required from human beings is to avail themselves to receive everything from God by faith."

Wesley taught that our entire spiritual lives are an act of God's grace. He names at least three periods in our spiritual development and the ways God's grace is at work during those times—[prevenient grace](#), [justifying grace](#), and [sanctifying grace](#). It may sound like he is talking about three different graces, but that is not the case.

"The issue is timing," O'Reilly explains, "not so much different stuff."

## **Justifying Grace: God Making Things Right**

The grace with which we are most familiar is what Wesley called justifying grace.

The Bible tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of God's glory" (Romans 3:23). Try as we might, we cannot be good enough. We need God to make things right between us, to justify us.

"Justification is another word for pardon," John Wesley writes in a sermon called [The Scripture Way of Salvation](#). "It is the forgiveness of all our sins; and, what is necessarily implied therein, our acceptance with God."

The Rev. Gary Henderson of United Methodist Communications uses an illustration from our word processors to help us understand what it means to be justified.

"I'm typing and the words and the lines are all over the page... and it looks like a mess," Henderson begins. "With a keystroke or two, I can bring it all together and order it and align it. They call it *justifying* to the left, to the right, or to the center... Sometimes it seems as though our lives are in pieces. We need a sense of order."

When we are justified, we are made right with God. Our sins are forgiven and God begins the process of lining our lives up to God's original design for us.

We are created in God's image, but that image is distorted by sin. By God's grace, through faith, we receive forgiveness. All of this is God's gift to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

“Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that ‘God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,’” Wesley writes in another sermon, [Justification by Faith](#), “but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for ‘my’ sins, that he loved ‘me,’ and gave himself for ‘me.’ And at what time soever a sinner thus believes...God justifieth that ungodly one.”

Those familiar with Wesley’s recounting of his [Aldersgate experience](#) in his journal, may hear echoes of similar themes in this description of justifying faith.

### **A Door**

In a pamphlet titled *The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained*, Wesley likens this moment in our spiritual development to a door. At the moment of justification, we cross the threshold from unbelief to belief. This, however, is not of our own doing.

As Ephesians 2:8 reminds us, salvation is a gift offered to us by our gracious (i.e. grace-filled) God. We do not earn it. Not one of us is worthy of it. We simply receive it in faith.

Getting to the door and growing on the other side of it, are also by God's grace. We will look at these dimensions of grace in the coming weeks.

### **GRACE’S POWER OVER SIN: SANCTIFYING GRACE**

“What is more powerful,” the Rev. Matt O’Reilly asks, “your sin or God’s grace?” “If it’s true that God’s grace is more potent and powerful, and can overcome our sin,” the pastor of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Mobile, Alabama continues, “what does that look like in my daily life?”

[John Wesley’s](#) fervent belief that God’s grace is more powerful than sin, motivated his tireless work to begin the [Methodist movement](#). He gathered Christians into [small groups](#) for support and encouragement as they lived into their faith. Together they confessed their sin, [watched over one another in love](#), and sought to love God and their neighbors as Jesus did.

Wesley taught that God’s grace shapes us throughout our lives. After God’s [prevenient grace](#) convicts us of our sin and our need for Christ, and after we receive forgiveness by faith through God’s [justifying grace](#), our spiritual growth continues. By God’s sanctifying grace, we mature as disciples of Jesus Christ.

[In a sermon](#), Wesley distinguished between justifying and sanctifying grace. “The one,” he writes of justifying grace, “implies what God *does for us* through the Son; the other, what God *works in us* by the Spirit.”

### **Sanctifying: Growing in Grace**

The word *sanctify* simply means “to make holy,” but not in a holier-than-thou sort of way. Instead, God’s sanctifying grace shapes us more and more into the likeness of Christ. As the Holy Spirit fills our lives with love for God and our neighbor, we begin to live differently.

As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, “be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature” ([12:2 CEB](#)).

Sanctifying grace signifies to us that we haven’t arrived. The Rev. Gary Henderson of United Methodist Communications says, “We are reminded that we are under construction.” We are becoming all God created us to be.

In a hymn we know as “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” ([United Methodist Hymnal](#) 384), [Charles Wesley](#) expresses a longing to be transformed by God’s grace. He writes:

*Finish then thy new creation,  
Pure and sinless let us be,  
Let us see thy great salvation,  
Perfectly restor’d in thee;  
Chang’d from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!<sup>1</sup>*

As we sing these words, we ask God to continue to work in our lives, to “finish” us into the “pure and sinless” people we were created to be. This may sound like a lot, but God’s grace is greater than our sin.

### **Grace Over Sin**

Wesley prescribed some ways we can put ourselves in positions to receive God’s sanctifying grace. These “[means of grace](#)” are things we do to grow toward “holiness of heart and life,” as Wesley called mature faith.

The United Methodist Church understands the means of grace in four basic categories: acts of *worship*, *devotion*, *justice*, and *compassion*. Acts of worship include things like going to church and receiving the sacrament of communion. Acts of devotion are those private times of worship that include activities like private prayer and Bible study. We know these things draw us closer to Christ, but we don’t stop there.

Also important are acts of compassion like reaching out to our neighbor in need and telling a friend about God’s love for them. Acts of justice like working to eliminate racism and advocating for the poor and marginalized are also means of grace.

Through participation in the means of grace, we put ourselves in spaces—physically, mentally, and spiritually—that open us up to allow God to fill us. We make room for the Holy Spirit to work on our hearts and lives.

We do not do these things to earn something from God. Our spiritual growth is a gift, given to us through the sanctifying grace of God.

As we seek to grow in love for God and neighbor, God works in us to eliminate sin from our lives. Why? Because God’s grace is greater than our sin. Not only following our deaths, but in our lives today.

*This article was written by Joe Iovino at UMC.org*