# SERMON SERIES: WHAT WE BELIEVE

# *“The Path Of Grace”*

## *Ephesians 2:1-9*

We’re working our way through a three-week sermon series entitled “What We Believe.” The focus of this series is our Wesleyan theology and what we believe as United Methodists. Last week we explored our Wesleyan perspective on the image of God in humanity. We said that Wesley understood the image of God to contain three elements: the natural image, the political image, and the moral image.

The natural image includes such things as our reason, creativity, free will and emotions. The political image is the authority and responsibility God has entrusted to us as his stewards of the created order. The moral image is how we love God and love others.

The image of God in humanity was marred, broken or lost due to the sin of Adam and Eve. As a result, we’re not naturally inclined to want God, to do good, to serve others, or to use our free will in positive ways. We rebel against what is right and have no interest in or desire for God. Wesley believed there were two ways in which the image of God was restored in us: through God’s prevenient grace and through the sacrificial death of Jesus.

If you’ve been part of the United Methodist Church for a few years, chances are you’ve heard terms like prevenient grace, justifying grace, entire sanctification, and “going on to perfection.” What do these things mean? Today we turn our attention to Wesley’s “path of grace”—how he saw and understood God’s grace to be at work in our lives.

***I had a professor in seminary who once said he believed that different denominations have preserved different aspects of the Christian experience. The Church of God is strong in the Holy Spirit. Episcopalians have preserved liturgy and tradition. If you want to know about gifts of the Spirit, you check out the Pentecostals. And if you want to know about grace, you look to the United Methodists.***

John Wesley understood God’s design for humanity was to have a holy people. God expressed this to Moses in Exodus 19:5-6: *Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth…. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’* The purpose was reiterated in 1st Peter 2:9: *…for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests,a holy nation, God’s very own possession.* God wanted Israel—and he wants the church today—to be holy as he is holy, so that we may be a reflection of the divine.

Turn with me in your Bibles to our Scripture reading, Ephesians 2:1-9. You’ll also want to have your bulletin insert handy for reference.

As United Methodists, we believe Wesley’s view of how God’s grace works in our lives. Last Sunday we discussed ***prevenient grace***, which Wesley said was the grace given to us before we ever came to salvation. It was God loving us before we knew him or feared him or loved him. It was God wooing us to himself.

Look at our Scripture reading. *Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. 2You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. 3All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.*

*4But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) 6For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. 7So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus. 8God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. 9Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.*

Paul said that before knowing Christ, we lived in rebellion against God. Perhaps not intentionally or cruelly, but we nevertheless did not acknowledge God and were held captive by our sins. Satan had us right where he wanted us. It was the prevenient grace of God that began to open our eyes to our broken, sinful condition.

***Take a look at that zig-zag line on your bulletin insert. At the bottom left hand corner is a small box. This indicates the beginning of our journey. You’ll see “prevenient grace” above the line, and “State of Natural Man” underneath. As the Holy Spirit draws us toward God through prevenient grace, we’re still in what Wesley called a “natural state,” that is, a state of rebellion against God.***

But notice as we move along the line we come to a large star labeled ***convicting grace***. Sometimes called “convincing grace,” this is the grace that allows us to be convicted of our sin, to confess and turn away from sin. Wesley said that during this time we come to love God, but it is with a spirit of bondage and fear. We now know we have done wrong and so are afraid for ourselves.

An important point for us to bear in mind as we move along: at every step of our spiritual journey, God gives us the grace we need. However, Wesley believed that we must cooperate with that grace—we must use the grace given to us. This is not an automatic process. We must apply the grace we have and live in it if we are to move forward. And if we choose not to use it, we become stuck in one place along the path.

Once we have been convicted of our sin, and have confessed and repented of it, we move into ***justifying***—or saving—***grace***. This is the grace we are most familiar with. It cleanses us of our sin and makes us right—justifies us—before the Father. We enter into the original relationship God wanted us to have with him. Sometimes referred to as “saving faith,” “new birth,” or “getting saved,” it’s at this point that we begin to love God, not out of a spirit of fear, but out of love.

Look again at Ephesians 2:4-5: *But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)* It’s purely and completely the work of God in Christ that allows us to step forward in faith and claim the grace which saves us. ***At this point along the path we are in what Wesley referred to as a “legal state.” This means we knew God in a legalistic, rule-oriented manner. We obeyed God because we were afraid of what would happen if we broke his laws.***

If we continue to cooperate with God’s grace we move along the path, learning how to love God more. We become more Christ-like in our words and actions. Our understanding of God’s Word deepens, and we become more obedient.

***Wesley said that the Father also gives us the assurance of our salvation. In Wesley’s day there was a lot of theological discussion about how—or if—one could truly know they were saved. Some of the Calvinists that Wesley debated with said ‘No,” we could never know for certain we have been saved. We would only know for sure on the last day. Wesley refuted that and said we could indeed be sure of our salvation. He said our spirit--which had responded positively to God’s justifying grace--is given that assurance by the presence of the Holy Spirit within us.***

***From time to time I’ve heard United Methodists say, “Well, I* hope *I’m saved…” Folks, we don’t have to hope! According to our theology, we can—and should—know whether or not we are a child of God. If we have truly accepted Jesus Christ as Lord, Savior and Master, then we have received the Holy Spirit, and he will confirm this in our hearts and spirits. If you find yourself wondering or questioning this, call upon God to give you his assurance. He will.***

As you see on your diagram, the path moves ever upward as we cooperate with God’s grace and mature in our faith. ***We exist in the “stage of a child” where our understanding and obedience is still very much child-like. We are learning, growing, making mistakes, learning some more, and applying what we’ve learned. As we continue to mature, we move from a child-like condition or understanding to “the stage of a young man”—with more maturity and understanding. We take more responsibility for our own spiritual growth.*** Usually around this timeWesley said there comes a point when we experience a second repentance. We’re more acutely aware of our sinful nature than ever before. We realize those places in our lives that we’ve not fully surrendered to Christ.

Once again, if we cooperate with God’s grace, we deepen in our love for God and for others, living more intentionally and joyfully in the Word, becoming even more obedient to the Spirit’s voice. The Father bestows upon us what Wesley called ***sanctifying grace***. Also known as “entire sanctification,” it’s at this point in our spiritual maturity that the full moral image of God is restored in us. The Lord rules totally/completely in our hearts and lives. There is full submission to Christ. We receive a fuller, deeper sense of the Spirit’s presence. We’ve entered into the “stage of a father.”

***Wesley believed that every Christian who cooperates with God’s grace and truly strives for holiness can be made perfect in love in this lifetime. Through sanctifying grace, we can love as perfectly as God does. Each year at Annual Conference we ordain a new class of elders for service in the church. And from Wesley’s time until this very day, every class of elders has had to publicly answer what are called the “historical questions.” These are a series of questions Wesley put to his preachers before he sent them out. One of the questions is, “Are you going on to perfection?” In other words, are you cooperating with God’s grace so that you can be completely sanctified in love in this life time?***

There’s a second assurance --of our sanctification-- just as there was an assurance of our justification and salvation earlier in our walk with Christ.

The final form of grace Wesley understood God to give to us is ***glorifying grace***. This grace, sometimes called “glorification,” is what we will receive when we join Christ in eternity. It’s what the saints receive when they depart this life. In this state of grace we exist in eternal fellowship with God and receive our final, pure, complete redemption forever.

Throughout our lives the Father gives us grace day-by-day so that we may become the holy people he desires. But we must cooperate with the Holy Spirit, put grace into action, and be obedient at every step of the journey. ***John Wesley wrote, “No man sins because he has no grace, but because he does not use the grace he has.”***

As you look at this diagram, where would you place yourself along the path of grace? Do you need convicting and justifying grace to take the step of surrendering your life to Christ for the first time, to repent of your sins and confess him as Lord and Savior? Do you need grace to grow? Do you need the grace to be made perfect in love? Would you like the assurance of your salvation?

Let us pray:

*Our most gracious Father, in whose image we are made and in whom we have our being, let us first pause to thank you for the grace you have given us during our lifetimes…*

*You know we have studied the “path of grace” insert and we have placed ourselves somewhere along that line. Hear now, in silence, the needs of your people for the grace to move forward…*

*You know, O God, the yearnings and needs of every heart and spirit in this place. Some here may need to know you better, more deeply, more fully. Some may need the grace to become more like Jesus. Some may need the assurance of their salvation and of your indwelling Spirit. There is grace enough for all: for the most broken sinner, for the one stuck at one point on the path, for the one who has wandered from the path.*

*Come, Holy Spirit, agent of God’s actions in the world; come, Lord Jesus, grant us courage to walk this path; come, Father Almighty, bless us with the necessary grace to represent you in the world, to love you as you deserve, and to love others as you have loved us. By the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.*