

# Grace Greater Than We Imagined

## A Global Methodist Understanding of Grace and Justification

This guide accompanies the Core of the Christian Faith podcast by Bishop Leah Gregory and Bishop Emeritis Mike Lowry. The teaching on **grace and justification** in the Wesleyan and Global Methodist tradition, are drawn from themes found in *Profoundly Christian, Distinctly Methodist*, David deSilva's annotated catechetical work, and the sermons of John Wesley.

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### Purpose of This Study

Grace and justification are not merely theological terms. They are the language of the gospel. They tell us what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, how sinners are made right with God, and how the Christian life begins and grows.

In the Wesleyan tradition, salvation is always understood as the work of God's grace from beginning to end. We are not accounted righteous before God because of our own works or merit. Rather, penitent sinners are justified before God only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. At the same time, the God who forgives us does not leave us unchanged. God has dispensed every grace necessary for salvation, justification, regeneration, and holy living.

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### I. The Big Picture

A Global Methodist understanding of salvation is broader than a single moment of conversion. It includes the whole saving work of God:

- **Prevenient grace** – God's grace going before us
- **Convincing grace** – God awakening us to sin and need
- **Justifying grace** – God forgiving and accounting sinners righteous through faith in Christ
- **Regenerating grace** – God making us new by the Holy Spirit
- **Sanctifying grace** – God forming us in holiness and love
- **Glorifying grace** – God bringing his saving work to completion

This is one of the great strengths of Wesleyan theology: it teaches the **whole way of salvation**.

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### II. Key Truths from the Podcast

#### 1. Grace is always first

We do not begin the relationship with God by our own initiative. God moves first. Before we seek him, he is already seeking us. Before we repent, he is already stirring our hearts. Before we believe, he is already at work.

This means salvation is never a human achievement. It is always the gift of divine mercy.

**Reflect:**

Where have you seen evidence that God was at work in your life before you fully recognized it?

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## **2. We are justified by faith, not by merit**

To be justified is to be forgiven and accounted righteous before God for the sake of Jesus Christ. Justification is not earned. It does not come through works, religious effort, moral improvement, or spiritual performance.

We are justified **only by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ**.

Faith, in the Wesleyan sense, is not mere agreement with facts. It is trust in Christ. It is relying upon him wholly. It is casting ourselves on the mercy of God in Jesus.

**Reflect:**

What is the difference between believing facts about Jesus and actually trusting Jesus?

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## **3. Justification and regeneration are related but not identical**

This is one of the most important distinctions in classical Methodist theology.

- **Justification** is what God does **for us**: pardoning our sins and restoring us to favor.
- **Regeneration** or the **new birth** is what God does **in us**: renewing the heart by the Holy Spirit.

In justification, our guilt is removed.

In regeneration, our inward life begins to be transformed.

These two belong together. God does not merely forgive sinners; he begins making them new.

**Reflect:**

Why is it important not to confuse forgiveness with inward transformation?

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#### 4. Grace is not opposed to holiness

Wesleyan theology rejects two errors:

- **Legalism** – trying to earn God’s favor through obedience
- **Carelessness** – assuming forgiveness means holiness does not matter

The Methodist way says that holiness is not the **root** of salvation, but it is certainly the **fruit** of salvation. Good works do not justify us, but living faith will bear fruit in love, obedience, mercy, and holy living.

#### **Reflect:**

How have you seen Christians drift either toward legalism or toward spiritual carelessness?

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### III. Going Deeper: Classical Methodist Teaching

#### A. What is prevenient grace?

Prevenient grace is the grace that “comes before.” It is God’s gracious activity in every person, awakening, drawing, convicting, and enabling a real response to the gospel.

Without prevenient grace, no one would turn to God.

With prevenient grace, the sinner is enabled to repent and believe.

This preserves two biblical truths:

- Salvation is entirely of grace
- Human response is real and meaningful

Prevenient grace does not save apart from Christ, but it prepares the way for a sinner to receive Christ.

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#### B. What is justification?

Justification is God’s gracious act of pardon and acceptance.

In justification:

- sin is forgiven

- guilt is removed
- the believer is reconciled to God
- the sinner is accounted righteous for Christ's sake

Justification is grounded entirely in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

It is important to note what justification is **not**:

- It is not self-improvement
- It is not moral perfection
- It is not the end of Christian growth
- It is not based on our worthiness

It is the merciful declaration of God over the penitent believer who trusts Christ.

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### **C. What is regeneration?**

Regeneration is the new birth. It is the inward change wrought by the Holy Spirit. If justification changes our standing before God, regeneration changes our spiritual condition.

In regeneration:

- the heart is awakened to new life
- new desires are planted
- love for God begins to grow
- the image of God begins to be restored
- the believer becomes a new creation in Christ

Methodists have always insisted that salvation includes both pardon and renewal.

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### **D. What is sanctification?**

Sanctification is the continuing work of God's grace by which believers are made holy in heart and life.

This includes:

- growth in obedience
- victory over the power of sin
- maturing in love
- increasing Christlikeness
- deeper devotion to God and neighbor

In Wesleyan theology, holiness is not cold moralism. It is love rightly ordered. It is the life of Christ formed in the believer by grace.

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#### **IV. Important Distinctions**

##### **1. Grace is free, but not cheap**

Grace costs us nothing because it cost Christ everything. It is free to us, but never trivial.

##### **2. Faith is the condition of justification, not the cause of it**

Christ is the cause. Faith is the means by which we receive what Christ has accomplished.

##### **3. Good works do not produce salvation, but salvation produces good works**

Works are evidence of grace, not the basis of grace.

##### **4. Assurance matters**

Wesley taught that believers may know the grace of God in their lives. Assurance is not arrogance. It is humble confidence in the mercy of God through Christ.

##### **5. Salvation is both instantaneous and ongoing**

There is a real new beginning in Christ, but there is also a lifelong journey of sanctification.

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#### **V. The Means of Grace**

Wesley taught that God ordinarily communicates grace through certain practices he called the **means of grace**. These are not ways of earning salvation. They are channels through which God nourishes, strengthens, and shapes his people.

##### **The ordinary means of grace include:**

- Prayer
- Searching the Scriptures
- The Lord's Supper
- Worship
- Fasting
- Christian fellowship
- Acts of mercy
- Accountability in the life of the church

These practices matter because grace is not vague. God has appointed ordinary means by which we remain close to Christ and open to the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Reflect:**

Which means of grace has been most formative in your life recently? Which one do you most need to renew?

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**VI. Scripture for Further Study**

These passages pair well with the podcast and this guide:

- **Ephesians 2:1–10** – saved by grace through faith, not by works
  - **Romans 3:21–28** – justification by faith apart from works of the law
  - **Romans 5:1–5** – justified by faith, peace with God
  - **John 3:1–8** – the new birth
  - **Titus 3:4–7** – washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit
  - **Philippians 2:12–13** – God at work in us
  - **1 John 4:7–19** – perfected in love
  - **Hebrews 12:14** – holiness and the life of faith
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**VII. Discussion Questions**

**For personal reflection**

1. When you hear the word *grace*, what first comes to mind?
2. Have you ever been tempted to base your standing with God on performance rather than Christ?
3. How would you explain justification to someone unfamiliar with church language?
4. In what ways have you experienced the difference between being forgiven and being transformed?
5. Where do you sense the Holy Spirit continuing his sanctifying work in your life?

**For a class or small group**

1. Why is prevenient grace such an important part of Methodist theology?
2. How does Wesley's distinction between justification and regeneration help us understand salvation more clearly?
3. Why is it dangerous to separate justification from holiness?
4. What is the difference between legalism and sanctification?
5. How do the means of grace help guard us from both passivity and self-reliance?

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## VIII. Teaching Summary for Leaders

If you are leading a class or discussion, here is the core takeaway:

**The Global Methodist understanding of grace and justification is thoroughly evangelical and deeply Wesleyan.**

God's grace goes before us, awakens us, leads us to repentance, justifies us through faith in Jesus Christ, regenerates us by the Holy Spirit, and continues sanctifying us in holy love. We are not saved by our works or merit, but neither are we left unchanged. The grace that pardons is also the grace that transforms.

A helpful teaching line:

**God does not merely forgive sinners; God makes sinners new.**

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## IX. Suggested Closing Prayer

Gracious God,  
we thank you that your mercy reaches us before we ever know how deeply we need you.  
Thank you for your prevenient grace that draws us,  
your justifying grace that forgives us,  
your regenerating grace that makes us new,  
and your sanctifying grace that continues to form us in holiness and love.

Teach us to trust not in our own merit, but in Jesus Christ alone.  
Give us assurance in your pardon and openness to your transforming work.  
Keep us near the means of grace,  
and make us a people who live in humble faith, joyful obedience, and holy love.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.