

## What is grace and how are we saved?

Since the advent of Christianity, Christians have been plagued by the same questions: how much do I participate in God's action of saving me and the world? Do I need to work to attain my salvation or is it freely given to me? How much does God work in my life and how do I understand his work in my life? The subject of grace is a theological concept with an practical response. We understand that God works in our lives and that he helps us in many ways. But how do we understand the help that God gives us? Are there different types or qualities of help that guide us to understand God's ways and appreciate his work in our lives? This is the subject of grace.

### **What is Grace?**

In a simple way, grace is the gift of God. This definition is given by the Catechism. Although this is an authoritative definition, I find it a bit unsatisfactory. What is meant by gift? How does gift help us understand God's action in our lives? But this is the best answer for understanding grace. The very fact that we are alive, the ability to move and live, the talents and gifts that we have, the resources we have, everything we have is given to us as a gift from God. Therefore the best way to understand grace is to realize the gifts that God has given us.

I began this topic with a series of questions, the most notable is the various types of grace. Although grace is understood as the gifts that God has given us, we can further classify grace in order to better understand God's actions in our lives. Actual grace is the ways in which God works in our lives. These graces are the ones that we are most familiar with. When something works out, or we are protected from something, when we are given inspiration or aid, all of these events are God's grace. The term "actual" helps us to recognize that these graces are specific ways in which God helps us. Sanctifying grace is the specific forms of grace that guide us to salvation. As the Catechism states: "Sanctifying grace is a habitual gift, a stable and supernatural disposition that perfects the soul itself to enable it to live with God" (2000). In order to be able to live with God, the soul needs to be perfected and transformed into a state in which it can live in God's presence. God works in the soul to guide the soul along this path. Some of the most common forms of sanctifying grace include Baptism, Eucharist, and Confession. All of these Sacraments dispose the soul to the grace which brings about the sanctification of the soul. Closely connected with sanctifying grace is habitual grace. These are graces that God gives to the person to help him/her live out God's commands and continue to remain faithful. Yes, we need grace even to do what God has commanded us.

Cooperating with grace:

Although God's grace is necessary for salvation and the only way to follow his commands and live in his presence, we do not necessarily use the graces God has given us. In the apparition of Our Lady of Grace, the seer, Dominic, asked Mary why some of her rings didn't have rays coming from them. She responded, these are the graces that no one has asked for. We assume God's grace at times and forget to ask for the graces we need. God wants us to ask for things and to use his grace to help us in our lives. But we, many times, don't realize the grace he is giving to us or ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Thus using God's grace has two principal actions:

1. God gives us the grace, and 2. We use and respond to his grace. Therefore, to fully cooperate with God's grace we need to recognize it, sometimes ask for it, and use it as he intended.

The reality of cooperating with God's grace has led to some improper teachings throughout the centuries. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Pelagius claimed that we must work to attain our own salvation. Grace is given to those who show they are worthy of it. Therefore those who do not follow God's commands and do what he says, cannot be saved or forgiven. This idea stresses too much our own initiative and reduces the action of God in our lives. The opposite idea of Pelagius' theology occurred in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries under the name Jansenism and Albigensianism. These two ideas center on the same idea: God does everything and we can do nothing but follow God's grace. The people who followed these ideas took no initiatives and would basically assume that everything they did was from God's grace. The ultimate problem is that this idea lacks personal autonomy. Essentially God does everything and we have no part or choice in the matter.

Faith vs. works:

Although it sounds like I am moving on to another topic, the faith vs. works debate summarizes everything from the last section. God gives us grace to follow his commands, show us who he is, help us to know him, and to be saved. We, conversely, are tasked with responding to God's grace. We are not beings devoid of choice so that we are forced to cooperate with God's grace neither are we tasked with earning God's grace. Grace is a free gift of which we are encouraged to cooperate with. Therefore we must use the faith that we have to understand and realize the grace in our lives and also use our personal autonomy to cooperate with God's grace.

The debate between the Protestants and the Catholics of the 16<sup>th</sup> century clarify the challenges in the debate between faith and works. The Protestants held firmly to the idea that our faith saves us and nothing else. No works, no actions, nothing besides faith is essential for our salvation. They stressed the importance of Jesus for our salvation. Nothing more need to be added to the actions Jesus already did for our salvation. Jesus' sacrifice was not lacking anything needed for our salvation nor did it need something from us. The Catholic Church held to the position that faith and works are necessary for salvation as stated in the Letter of St. James. Although faith is necessary for salvation and we are saved through Jesus' Passion and Death, we comply with this grace and the gift that Jesus gave us. Our salvation requires something from us. We need to use these gifts and comply with God's grace in order to be saved. So, although faith is primary in our salvation, works flow from faith and complete it.

### **How are we saved?**

Many people do not reflect on the salvific event of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection, Why did Jesus need to come? How are we saved through him? Is there another way to be saved? The answers are rather straightforward and simple. The only way we can be saved is through Jesus.

Salvation is the state of the soul in which it is perfectly united with God. Until that moment of perfect union, each person is plagued with sin and the tendency against God's will which is called concupiscence. Since we tend to go against God's will, sin, and cause God wrath to flare,

we cannot merit salvation neither can we attain it without being free from sin. The ultimate problem is that we cannot remove sin and the effect of sin from our lives. The ramifications of our sins are way to large. There is no way we can do enough to undo the effects of our sins. God knows this. Out of his great love for us he sent his son to take on the effects of our sins and therefore give us a way to be saved. But how does this work?

Many people like to think of Jesus as taking the brunt of God's wrath caused by sin. If Jesus took on God's wrath, then God is fighting himself. This is a logical contradiction. Although God is angry due to the sins we have committed, the punishment of sin is written into the fabric of the sin itself. God does not need to inflict a punishment upon us for every sin we commit because the sin itself causes the punishment. Instead he looks with love upon us even in our sins and wants us to be forgiven. Since no amount of sacrifices or offerings can ever undo the effects of sin, we needed someone or something of such great value that could undo the effects of our sins. This person is Jesus. Jesus, being God, can offer himself, the one perfect sacrifice, and expiate the world from the effects of sin and thus give us an avenue for forgiveness. The image that best describes Jesus' action is a courtroom. During a trial, the prosecutor and the defendant debate about the level of culpability and the innocence of the person being tried. Once their arguments end, the jurors pronounce a sentence. The judge then gives a punishment for the crimes committed and the trial concludes. In this case, the prosecutor is the devil or God himself who knows everything that happens reducing the need for a jury. Jesus pleads our case as the defendant before God who wants the world to be healed as an act of justice. In an act of love for us and knowing that we cannot endure the punishment, Jesus takes on the punishment due to our crimes instead of us. This is called penal substitution.

How do we participate in our own salvation?

Some argue that our only participation in our salvation is to choose Jesus. Once we have accepted Jesus as our savior, we are saved. This idea has several problems. The first, and most glaring problem, is that it forces God's power. He cannot do otherwise than save us as long as we accept him. Second, God's justice is overthrown by our free-choice. Regardless of what we do for the rest of our lives, regardless of how many people are hurt or the sins we committed, we have to be saved. Our one singular choice becomes an eternal choice. Third, it diminished our free-will. The one choice we made becomes now an eternal choice that we cannot rescind. If later in life we decide that we no longer want to follow God, we can't. Our choice from before prevents us from rejecting God.

The discussion surrounding our salvation centers on free-will. God gave us the gift of free-will that we could make decisions and ultimately choose him. Without the gift of free-will we are forced to choose God, comply with his will like a robot, and have no other choice than Heaven. We cannot make moral decision or decisions of our own. Neither can we choose to love. God didn't want a bunch of robots forced to worship him. He wants a group of his sons and daughters who chose to love him and want to worship him. Our salvation is dependent on free-will. We have to make a choice. No a once-and-done choice but a continual choice. The goal of free-will and the necessity of faith and works requires us to choose at each moment of our lives whether we want God and want to continue to love and serve him.

So, how do we participate in our salvation? The most important starting point is to recognize and realize that salvation is a gift. We are not required to accept the gift nor to comply with it. Our free-will gives us the ability to choose to comply with God's will at every moment of our lives. The next most important point is to know of our part in our salvation, the answer to the question. Once we realize the gift of our salvation, we must choose to accept it with its implications. Our salvation requires us to work to comply with God's laws, come to know him as God, and choose to love and desire him. We cannot accept our salvation without something that corresponds to that choice, hence works. Our works, our daily actions of praying, celebrating the Sacraments, doing good works, helping others, and conforming our lives to the will of God are all actions that help us on the route to our salvation. Ultimately, all these actions are merely training for the test that comes upon our death. Will we choose God in the final and eternal decision? Will we want him enough to comply with his will and desire his mercy and love? These are the most important questions and the end to which our faith points us.