

“Responsible Grace”

Romans 6:1-2, 12-14; Ephesians 4:29-5:2 (NRSV)

Grace has been poured out on us. What’s next?

Last week, we learned that those who have faith in Christ have been made right with God through the faithfulness of Jesus all the way to the cross. And, further, that this is 100% by the grace of God. It is purely God’s gift, or we would all be boasting about our lifesaving spirituality! So, yes, it is all about God’s magnificent, wondrous outpouring of grace.



So, what is next, we might ask. Because of the wonderfulness of grace, should we all simply go out and sin more so there will be more grace? That is Paul’s rhetorical question in Romans 6:1. Of course, that is ridiculous. God hasn’t saved us so we can wallow in envy, greed, and hate, but so we can become ever more kind, helpful, and compassionate, *so that we can reflect God’s love in all that we do and say.*

When we come to faith in Christ, none of us are instantly transformed into Christlike souls who love God and others without fail. Instead, when we are justified, i.e., made right with God, we are set apart for God’s purposes (one sense of “sanctified” – an accomplished fact) and we begin the process of “sanctification” (the second sense of sanctification – growing in Christian virtue).¹ It is our transformation into ever holier people and it is both our work and God’s work, in the person of the Holy Spirit. We are justified by God’s grace alone, but the work of sanctification is a cooperative project.

John Wesley spoke of “sanctifying grace,” as set forth by the UMC in our *Book of Discipline*:

We hold that the wonder of God’s acceptance and pardon does not end God’s saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.”

This gracious gift of God’s power and love, the hope and expectation of the faithful, is neither warranted by our efforts nor limited by our frailties.²

Minds that are habitually filled with the love of God and others is about as good a way to describe a virtuous person as I can imagine—so long as we remember that, in Christian parlance, love is what we do, not what we feel. Likewise, with Wesley’s image of walking as Jesus walked. We must remember that it is by God’s grace and not by our own effort that we are transformed.

As you sometimes hear people say, God saves us as we are, but does not leave us as we were. N. T. Wright elaborates on this in his commentary on Romans. His reflections are worth a careful reading:

This chapter [Romans 6] shines a bright spotlight on the dangerous half-truth, currently fashionable, that “God accepts us as we are.” Indeed, the question of 6:1 could be read as raising exactly this question: Will “God’s acceptance” do as a complete grounding of Christian ethics? Emphatically not. Grace reaches where humans are, and accepts them as they are, because anything less would result in nobody’s being saved. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. But grace is always *transformative*. God accepts us where we are, but God does not intend to leave us where we are. That would be precisely to “continue in sin, that grace might abound.” Unless we are simply to write Romans 6 out of the canon, the radical inclusivity of the gospel must be matched by the radical exclusivity of Christian holiness. There is such a thing as continuing to let sin reign in one’s mortal body, and it will require serious moral effort to combat this tendency. The idea that Christian holiness is to be attained

¹ These two senses of sanctification are another example of the already/not yet reality of the God’s kingdom. We are already sanctified and not yet sanctified. It is like a couple who have said their marriage vows but have not consummated their union. They are married already and not yet married.

² Part III: Doctrinal Standard and Our Theological Task, ¶102. Section 1—“Our Doctrinal Heritage, Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases,” *The United Methodist Book of Discipline*, 2016.

by every person simply doing what comes naturally would actually be funny were it not so prevalent. True freedom is not simply the random, directionless life, but the genuine humanness that reflects the image of God. This is found under the lordship of Christ. And this lordship makes demands that are as testing and difficult as they are actually liberating.³

Based on his own story, Paul went through a years-long period of intense transformation which continued through his many years of apostolic ministry. John Wesley knew that all believers are set apart by God [sanctified] for a purpose and there are few examples better than Paul.

Persecutor and apostle

Born in Tarsus, a city on the Southern coast of Asia Minor, Saul⁴ moved to Jerusalem while a young man. There, he pursued his education and excelled. Making his place among the Pharisees in Jerusalem, Saul's intellect, energy, and zeal attracted the attention of Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers in all Israel. Saul advanced fast, beyond what was achieved by most Jews of his age.

Thus, it is no surprise that Saul put his energies to work ridding Israel of Jesus-followers after the crucifixion of the blaspheming pretender from Nazareth. Saul would later acknowledge that he violently persecuted the Jesus-movement, seeking to destroy it—thoroughly and quickly. Saul was present at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, holding the coats of those who threw the stones.

While on a trip to Damascus to round up some of the Jesus-followers, Saul was visited by Jesus. Saul saw a blinding light, fell to the ground, and was asked point-blank by Jesus, "Why do you persecute me?" At Jesus' instructions and though temporarily blinded, Saul made his way to Damascus where a Christian named Ananias laid hands on Saul, who was then filled with the Holy Spirit and restored to sight. Saul would soon learn what God had told Ananias; Saul was the one God had chosen to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

Paul was a perfect choice for the job. As a Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, his Jewish credentials were unassailable. But he was a product of the Greco-Roman world having been born and raised in Tarsus. He was knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. Paul was blessed with a powerful intellect and enormous energy. He had a trade, tent-making, that he could use to support himself.

The road called sanctification

From violent destroyer of God's church to God's apostle to the Gentiles. We'd be hard pressed to find a more dramatic conversion story than Paul's or one with more far ranging consequences. God worked powerfully in Paul, using him to shape the faith that has been passed on to us.

But this was not easy for Paul. He spent nearly fifteen years after his conversion learning and working among the Jewish followers of Jesus before undertaking his first missionary journey in the late 40's AD. Throughout his ministry, Paul would constantly have to defend himself against the charge that he was a second-class apostle because he had not been among Jesus' disciples before the crucifixion.

And like the rest of us, Paul struggled to live out his faith, to live as the person God had called him to be. Paul knew that God had made him into a new person, but he also knew that he had his own work to do in this. In his letter to the Romans (7:14-25), Paul writes dramatically and frankly about his own inner struggle and, by extension, the inner struggles of us all to live out our salvation. He delights in the law of God but knows that he is at war with himself.

Because God can and does work with such power in our lives, it is very tempting to say to someone one, "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved." But sanctification is about what we do as well. Will we be givers of grace, growing in holiness?

³ N. T. Wright, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 548

⁴ Paul was born with the name "Saul," by which he is referred to in Acts until he begins his ministry to the Gentiles, when he becomes known by the Greek name, "Paulos."