



# Everything You Need to Know About Grace

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## Grace is God's Way

In 1969 a song achieved a record by spending seventy-five weeks inside the Billboard Top 40 chart. The song can still be heard today, mostly at funerals and karaoke. The key phrase of the song has even been inscribed on a number of tombstones..."I did it my way". The song *My Way* was Frank Sinatra's signature song, a hymn to individuality and egocentricity. Over time, Sinatra came to loath the song as being self-serving and self-indulgent. The song's popularity both then and now gives us an indication of the rampant pride existing in the world.

If there is one vice the Lord hates, it's pride. "Pride, arrogance, the evil way, and the perverse mouth I hate" (Proverbs 8:13). The Lord doesn't want us doing things our way. He wants things done His way. Saint Faustina learned this lesson the hard way, as documented in her diary in paragraph 1087.

"When one day I resolved to practice a certain virtue, I lapsed into the vice opposed to that virtue ten times more frequently than on other days. In the evening, I was reflecting on why, today, I had lapsed so extraordinarily, and I heard the words: **You were counting too much on yourself and too little on Me.** And I understood the cause of my lapses."

It seems hard to believe God would actually block virtue in someone. This is where I learned the end doesn't justify the means. This is also where I learned extra-super effort to accomplish something for God is futile. God says "My purpose will stand and all My good pleasure I will accomplish" (Isaiah 46:10). Let's face it, it really is His work and we accomplish absolutely nothing for God. We are merely the tools of His work.

Not a single good work we do is of our own accord. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance as our way of life" (Ephesians 2:10). We only accomplish what God lays out in advance for us. The Church confirms, "Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us" (Catechism, 2001). Thus, pride in the least amount must not exist in the life of one who is holy.

The virtue of humility might just be the second greatest virtue after love. But even in seeking humility we must turn to God for help, as we can't even become humble of our own effort. My wife's dad was holy and had a good sense of humor. He would sometimes joke "There's nobody with more humility than me", then he would laugh. He made a great point worth noting.

## Grace is Unmerited Favor

In the Old Testament, we read verses like "Noah found favor in the eyes of Yahweh" (Genesis 5:8) and "to the humble, He gives grace" (Proverbs 3:34). There's that humility again! Translations of the Old Testament often interchange the words "favor" and "grace" based on context. However, in all cases both words originate from the same Hebrew word "chen", pronounced KHANE (Strongs, 2580).

Chen means graciousness or favor. The primary concept of chen is the grace or favor bestowed is unmerited, unearned. In the Old Testament, chen is a very significant concept. It was associated with God's unmerited graciousness towards humanity and was understood as a divine quality. God freely chose the Hebrew nation as His people; not because they merited it, but because of His gracious love.

The concept of God's unmerited grace continues in the New Testament. "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8). From this verse, we understand salvation is neither by faith nor works. Works only confirm the faith we profess; and faith is nothing more than our response to, our conviction in, God's grace.



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The Greek word for “grace” in the above verse is “charis”, pronounced KHAR-ece (Strong’s Greek, 5485). Charis also means graciousness or favor, corresponding exactly to the Hebrew word “chen”. In the New Testament, however, God’s grace is focused more on salvation and less on the covenant He made with His people.

From this understanding of grace in both Old and New Testaments, we can turn to the Church to help us fully understand the concept of grace. “Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, partakers of the divine nature” (Catechism, 1996). “Grace is the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons.” (Catechism, 2021). “This vocation to eternal life is supernatural. It depends entirely on God’s gratuitous initiative, for he alone can reveal and give himself. It surpasses the power of human intellect and will, as that of every other creature (Catechism, 1998). “Grace is a participation in the life of God” (Catechism, 1997).

Something to keep in mind concerning grace. Grace doesn’t take away or restrict free will. “God’s free initiative demands man’s free response” (Catechism, 2002). Also, grace helps us to overcome sin but doesn’t take away temptation or our free choice to sin. “The grace of Baptism delivers no one from all the weakness of nature. On the contrary, we must still combat the movements of concupiscence that never cease leading us into evil” (Catechism, 978). Grace is God’s free help, but we must accept it and cooperate with it.

## **Actual grace**

Actual grace refers to a special intervention of God’s unmerited favor. Actual grace is temporary and given for a specific need or purpose. It doesn’t reside in the soul (Catechism, 2000). Think of actual grace like that extra shot of espresso put into the coffee after a poor night’s sleep.

Have you ever been inspired “out of the blue” to pray for someone and had no idea why? This could be the effect of actual grace. Have you ever had a nagging thought pertaining to a certain sin or a desire to receive the sacraments more often? These can also be the effects of actual grace.

God, in His eternal love for all people, can bestow actual grace to anyone, even if they are a grave sinner or non-Christian. Actual grace can be God’s unmerited favor bestowed on an unbeliever to lead them to salvation. The story is told of a widow who was distraught over her husband’s suicide. For he had always claimed to not believe there was God. As the woman walked past Saint John Vianney, who never met the woman, the Saint stopped and said “He is saved!” In disbelief, she turned to the Saint. The Saint again said “He is saved!” The Saint went on to explain how God gave her husband an opportunity for an act of contrition as he jumped off the bridge and before he hit the water. The man repented and God spared his soul. The Saint told the woman her prayers to Mary merited this chance. Her husband was in Purgatory and needed her prayers.

When we pray for our loved ones to be saved or return to the Church, God doesn’t just overcome their will and restore them. Every prayer leads God to an unmerited favor in the person’s life, calling them back to Him. They still have the free will to reject it, which is why we don’t always see results from prayers for hurting souls. It is important to remain faithful to prayer and not give up. Every single prayer will result in another intervention of actual grace for them; and one more opportunity to repent.

## **Sanctifying grace**

Sanctifying grace is an ongoing grace bestowed by God at Baptism. The first effect of sanctifying grace at Baptism is the forgiveness of all sins, both original sin and personal sin (Catechism, 1263). The ongoing effect is it enables the Baptized to believe in God, empowers them to live under the prompting of the Holy Spirit and matures them



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in holiness and goodness through virtue (Catechism, 1266). Sanctifying grace brings about participation in the life of God (Catechism, 1997).

The concept of sanctifying grace can be traced all the way back to Leviticus 20:8, "I am the Lord who sanctifies you" (Leviticus 20:8). The Hebrew word for "sanctifies" in this verse is the verb form of the word "qodesh", and literally means "to make holy". Sanctification, therefore, is the act of making something holy.

"Since it belongs to the supernatural order, grace escapes our experience and cannot be known except by faith. We cannot therefore rely on our feelings or our works to conclude that we are justified and saved" (Catechism, 2005). The only way one knows for sure if sanctifying grace is working in their life is according to the Lord's words "Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

## **Grace and Baptism**

Here is a key concept concerning Baptism. Baptism must not be reduced to a ritual intended to inaugurate a person into the Christianity Club and grant them entry into Heaven. Baptism isn't the doorway to Heaven, but rather the entry, or initiation, into a life of faith. "For all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow after Baptism. For this reason, the Church celebrates each year at the Easter Vigil the renewal of baptismal promises. Preparation for Baptism leads only to the threshold of new life. Baptism is the source of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth" (Catechism, 1254).

Holiness is not an option! Baptism, because it imparts sanctifying grace, compels us to seek a life of holiness. Sanctifying grace always calls us to holiness and transformation into the image of God. To reject or downplay the need for holiness in one's life is to reject or downplay the fullness of the Sacrament of Baptism. "Be holy" is God's command (Leviticus 9:1-2). God bestows the unmerited favor of salvation and the unmerited favor of the Holy Spirit. These favors compel us to be holy.

Whatever we do as Christians and whatever we feel we accomplish as Christians, grace and humility require us to remember we always rely on God. Without grace, we are nothing. The Church explains:

"Indeed we also work, but we are only collaborating with God who works, for his mercy has gone before us. It has gone before us so that we may be healed, and follows us so that once healed, we may be given life; it goes before us so that we may be called, and follows us so that we may be glorified; it goes before us so that we may live devoutly, and follows us so that we may always live with God: for without him we can do nothing." (Catechism, 2001)

If you want to do anything worthwhile for God and gain merit for it, tap into His sanctifying grace and ask Him for an increase of grace.