

A photograph of a rowing team on a calm lake at dawn. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a misty atmosphere with light rays filtering through the trees in the background. The rowers are silhouetted against the bright horizon.

The Means of GRACE

Traditioned Practice in Today's World

A faint, stylized illustration of a large, thick book with many pages, positioned behind the author's name.

ANDREW C. THOMPSON

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SOW FOR A GREAT AWAKENING

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Preface

I'M GRATEFUL FOR THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF OTHER pastors and teachers before me who have written in the area this book covers. They have taught me a great deal. These Wesleyan authors have contributed to a revived interest in spiritual practices and disciplines in our tradition—helping the church to understand how a distinctly patterned approach to discipleship lies at the heart of the Wesleyan understanding about how transformation occurs over time. Steve Harper and Hal Knight have written important popular-level works on Wesleyan spirituality and the means of grace. Their contributions have been important in retrieving the language of the means of grace for a broad Wesleyan audience. I've been particularly influenced by Knight's academic-level work on the means of grace as well. Other contributions by Dean Blevins, Ole Borgen, Kenneth Collins, Richard Heitzenrater, and Randy Maddox have also been deeply influential on both my thinking and practice of the means of grace.

My reason for writing this book is threefold. First, I want to show the deep connection between biblical spirituality and practical discipleship. John Wesley believed that the means of grace are important primarily because together they are the pattern of faithful discipleship we find given to us in the Bible. Wesley taught that the means of grace are given to us by Jesus Christ in the four gospels

of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are also the way the early church patterned its life in the Acts of the Apostles. So in a way, the entire Wesleyan teaching around the means of grace is a way to try and explain the biblical model of discipleship for the Christian life. I find that part of Wesley's practical theology to be utterly compelling and I believe it should be shared far and wide.

Second, I wanted to write this book to share with a broad audience the actual structure and approach that Wesley used in applying the means of grace to practical life. We live in such a consumerist culture that we apply that mind-set to everything we do—including our practice of discipleship. I've met Christians who talk about how they love to study the Bible or find their primary connection to God in prayer. Others will say that they practice their discipleship through their participation in service projects or mission trips. Still others think of their practice of faith as focused primarily in Sunday morning worship. The reality about the Wesleyan approach to discipleship is that there is no buffet-style picking and choosing. Instead, there is a strong conviction that the means of grace should serve as the "pattern of the Christian life" (to use Knight's phrase). Only when we live into a form of discipleship that embraces all the means of grace do we discover ourselves growing into the kind of spiritual maturity that is spoken about in Ephesians 4:15: "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."

Finally, I thought it was important to write this book as a way to offer Christians an accessible guide to practicing the means of grace in their own lives and in their own communities. We are creatures of habit, and we live our lives by routines. Sometimes we self-consciously choose

those routines, and sometimes we find them imposed on us by outside circumstances. It is easy to fall into bad routines unless we make a sustained effort to do otherwise. The means of grace offer us such a choice, whereby we can embrace a holy routine that aims at forming us into real disciples of Jesus Christ. In the Wesleyan tradition, we consider the life of discipleship to point us toward nothing less than salvation in this present life—and to offer us a foretaste of the salvation that is to come.

A project of this sort would not be possible without a wonderful group of people who have offered their support and encouragement along the way. J. D. Walt and Andrew Miller at Seedbed Publishing were encouraging of this book from the beginning; Andrew, in particular, has been a conversation partner throughout the writing process and has been gracious with both feedback and deadline extensions. The whole Seedbed team is a joy to work with.

Some of the content in this book served first as teaching topics in church and seminary settings. I'm grateful to the congregations of Mt. Carmel United Methodist Church (Henderson, NC), Duke's Chapel United Methodist Church (Durham, NC), and Marion United Methodist Church (Marion, AR), for their willingness to engage material on the means of grace through sermons and other teaching sessions. I am especially indebted to the students in my "Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition" course at Memphis Theological Seminary, in both the fall of 2012 and the spring of 2015, for the lively conversations we had and the insights they provided.

My greatest thanks go to my wife, Emily, and our three children: Alice, Stuart, and Anna Charlotte. They are patient with me beyond anything I have a right to expect, and they

indulge my tendency to lose myself down one theological rabbit hole after another. Alice, at age four, shows promise of becoming the theologian I could never hope to be. To God alone be the glory, for them and for the opportunity to write this book while living with and loving them.

Finally, I want to offer my love and gratitude to my parents, Charlotte and Robert Thompson. In ways beyond counting they gave me the kind of upbringing that helped me to know the power of the means of grace before I ever learned the term itself. Both the life of our family and the life of the church to which our family belonged provided me with my earliest spiritual formation and encounter with the grace we find in Jesus Christ. Not long after my first daughter was born, my mom said to me in an almost offhand way, “Andrew, now you’ll know how I’ve felt about you for all these years.” Those were true words. Also true is the fact that we often fail to express our deepest sentiments toward those we love in an adequate way. I have no words to tell Mom and Dad fully how I feel about them, but I do have this book. And so I dedicate it to them.

INTRODUCTION

Looking for Direction

DISCIPLESHIP.

That's the word I've heard all my life to describe what the Christian faith is supposed to be about. What do you call people who follow Jesus Christ? *Disciples*. What is the word we use for the stuff Jesus' followers do in service to him? *Discipleship*. Disciple is a biblical term as well. Jesus' closest companions in the Gospels are called the twelve disciples. And in the Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands his followers to go into the world and "make disciples of all nations."

So the Bible tells us that Jesus' followers are called disciples. If we want to be counted among those followers, then doesn't it make sense that we figure out just what is a disciple?

A Personal Story

My trouble for the longest time when I was a kid was that I didn't know what discipleship was supposed to look like. Was it just going to church regularly? Saying your prayers at night? Was it being involved in a certain kind of activity or service work? Being a nice person? One problem with

identifying what discipleship looked like in practical life was that nobody ever really told me. My family was always active in our church when I was growing up. I went to Sunday school and attended worship every week. I learned stories from the Bible and heard sermons about God's love. I also remember being taught about faith—which was believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the world.

But discipleship? I'm not sure we ever went in-depth on that.

I think I also did what a lot of other kids did, which was to think about church or faith as one thing in my life among many other things. Sure, church was important. But so were family, school, sports, playing with friends, and so on. I never really got around to *integrating* my faith into every other part of my life. Church had its place, but it was pretty neatly parceled out to certain days of the week and certain regular events. When I was there, I gave my mind and heart over to it. But when I was elsewhere, my mind and heart were occupied with other things.

When I left home at age eighteen, I left all the structure that life had provided me up to that point. All of a sudden, the strongest positive influences in my life (especially my parents) were hours away. Pretty soon I lost any sense of grounding as to what I was doing and why. My faith in Jesus Christ waned and my connection to his church soon fell by the wayside. I drifted with the wind—for years, actually. Like a lot of people at that age, I dove headlong into habits that were not healthy for my mind, body, or spirit.

Looking back, I think I was waiting for a monumental change from childhood to adulthood to happen, as if I would

change from a caterpillar to a butterfly. Instead all I found was that the same old longings and fears I had always had were still there. If anything, they had become deeper (and I became more and more unsatisfied). A hunger gnawed at me, and none of the ways I tried to satisfy it worked. Typically they only made things worse. I tried to fill my hunger with new experiences, new relationships, and new adventures. What I didn't understand was that my hunger was a spiritual hunger.

By the time I was in my early twenties, I was miserable. So finally I started to pray again, almost as a last resort. (Not because I had much confidence in my prayers, but because nothing else in my life had seemed to work.) My grandfather's death had a huge impact on me around that time. In fact, I felt the first hints of a kind of inward renewal when my prayers following his death seemed like they were answered. I even began to go to church again after years of staying away—hesitantly at first, but later with real energy for a recommitment to my faith. At some point I realized that Jesus had never left me; I had only left him. My heart began to open after a long time of being closed, and I felt as if a part of me that had died was being made to live again.

During this period of renewal in my life, I was digging into the Christian faith in ways I never had. I was reading books and having conversations and embracing devotional practices that were really meeting the spiritual hunger I had so long misunderstood. But surprisingly, this new direction in my life was increasing my inward hunger at the same time! I was still taking baby steps, but I was also starting to realize that there were some things I needed if I wanted to really gain traction and grow spiritually. The

main thing that I needed, I finally realized, was a pattern or framework for . . . well, *discipleship* of course. I needed to learn what the life of a real disciple of Jesus looked like.

The Way of Discipleship vs. The Way of the World

In the years that followed, I sought to find out about discipleship through a combination of study and practice. I began reading the Bible seriously for the first time in my life. I also started reading a lot of John Wesley's writings—the founder of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century who wrote a great deal on grace, salvation, and the Christian life. In many ways, Wesley became a spiritual mentor to me. His writings helped me understand the biblical witness much more clearly.

Together with my studies, I began to take the practice of my discipleship more seriously. I came to the realization that discipleship wasn't just about "doing the right thing" out of a sense of duty or obligation. Instead it was about loving the Lord my God and loving my neighbor. If I got those things right, then all the activity of day-to-day life would follow. I was fortunate at this time to have mentors and friends much wiser than I who showed me the right path again and again. They were God's instruments in my life.

Eventually I became convinced that three things were absolutely essential for real discipleship. They are discipleship's three necessary ingredients, you might say. Without all three of them, you will end up with something that might resemble discipleship in a surface way but in reality is something quite different. Those three components are:

1. Community
2. Discipline
3. Transformation

The right kind of *community* is essential for true discipleship because none of us can go it alone. There's a reason that Jesus called twelve disciples together instead of just one. There's also a reason that the church stuck together as a community after Jesus' resurrection rather than splitting up. Without a community around you to teach you, support you, and hold you accountable, you will never grow to be a mature disciple.

We also need *discipline* in order to become real disciples of Jesus. For the same reason that an athlete will never achieve excellence without dedication and practice, we will never become the kind of disciples God wants us to be without those same things. It took me a while to come around to this understanding. I knew it was true for sports, just as I knew it was true for academics and business. But I never applied the same standard to my faith. When I began to realize that my faith was the most important part of my life, then I also saw how much I had missed by approaching it in a lackadaisical and haphazard fashion.

“The soul and body
make a man, and the
spirit and discipline
make a Christian.”

—John Wesley¹

The last thing we must have for true discipleship is the experience of *transformation*. This one is a little tricky, because *we* can't make it happen. We don't transform ourselves. Rather, we experience transformation by God's

grace. Yet the very way that God's grace works means that we can expect to be transformed as we commit ourselves to the practice of discipleship within a community of faith. In other words, God promises us that we will be transformed when we live faithful lives over time.

I really think that these three elements—community, discipline, and transformation—are very countercultural today. They make up what I would call the “way of discipleship.” Our culture gives us a different pattern for how to live. We will call it the “way of the world.” Where God calls us to be a part of a community, the culture promotes individualism at every turn. Likewise, where true discipleship calls for true discipline, our culture encourages rabid consumerism (which means nothing more than saying “yes” to every felt desire we have). And where the gospel promises transformation, our culture promotes a kind of materialism that says we should not put our faith in God but rather in the things of this world.

I spent long enough embracing the way of the world that I came to realize how empty it is in the end. I am still very much a disciple-in-training. There is plenty that I don't do well, and there's plenty else that I still have to learn. I need all the help I can get! But I am convinced that the only life worth living is a life following Jesus Christ. It's in that kind of life that the only true happiness can be found.

The Pattern of Christian Discipleship

John Wesley had a phrase for what it means to live faithfully as a disciple of Jesus: *walking in the ways of God*. I love that phrase because it makes me think of discipleship as an action verb. It means that discipleship is really about how

you live every day of your life. It's about taking seriously those things that are of greatest value, and making them your top priority.²

There is actually a Wesleyan pattern of discipleship for how to understand what these ways of God are. It's a pattern that shows us how to build up holy habits in our daily lives. One of the interesting things you'll find when you read the work of neuroscientists and psychologists who study human behavior is that we are all very much creatures of habit.³ Even without meaning to do so, we will form habits that guide our day-to-day behavior. Once established, habits are very difficult to break. So that means that establishing the right kind of habits is really important.

When we talk about discipleship having a pattern, we mean that there are *faith habits* that work together to mold us into mature Christians. These faith habits are the subject of this book. They're called the "means of grace."

John Wesley and the early Methodist movement have had a profound impact on how I think about discipleship. The practices that we call the means of grace are all drawn from biblical examples, but it is through John Wesley's writings and the example of the early Methodists that we find the means of grace put together into a framework that offers us a real pattern of discipleship.⁴ When I teach Wesleyan theology, I always tell my students that we should only ever read John Wesley (or any Christian theologian) insofar as he gives us a clear window into Scripture. I believe Wesley does give us such a window, and that's why I've taken his views on the means of grace seriously. It's also why I want to share this part of Wesley's approach to discipleship with you.

In the chapters that follow, you will read about what the means of grace are. You will also read about how they can work together to shape your very life. I'll warn you on the front end: the means of grace call for dedication both to a faith community and to a life of discipline. If you don't want those things as a part of your life, you might want to stop reading now. But if you have a sense that both a real community and real discipline do lie at the heart of a mature faith, then I can tell you that the means of grace *will* lead to transformation for you. I say that not because I promise it but because I believe that God promises it.

Nothing about discipleship is possible apart from God's grace. Because of that, the first chapter to follow this introduction will be about grace. *Grace* is a word that is used repeatedly throughout the New Testament, but it is not always well understood. Chapter 1 will present grace in a way that will help you to understand how important it is and how powerful it is. This chapter will also describe just what we mean by "the means of grace."

The chapters that follow after that (chapters 2–10) will be divided into three parts:

- instituted means of grace (chapters 2–7);
- prudential means of grace (chapters 8–9); and
- general means of grace (chapter 10).

These are categories that John Wesley used to help explain how the means of grace work in the Christian life. Don't get intimidated by the terms. They will make more sense as you read on.

You'll find that all the chapters on the instituted means of grace will follow the same approach. Because these are the means of grace most obviously identifiable from the life

of Jesus, the way we can talk about them is pretty standard. The first section of each of the chapters will explain the biblical witness on that particular area. The second section will discuss where we find each means of grace within the history of Wesleyan spirituality. The third section will look at how to think about the topics in practical life.

The remaining chapters on the prudential and general means of grace are arranged a little bit differently, mostly because how we identify them is based on a combination of the Bible and our own experiences. But with them, I also try to stay focused on both the way a Wesleyan view on them helps us to understand them better and how we can apply them in daily life. My hope throughout is that you'll see how each one of these wonderful practices of discipleship is grounded in the Bible, given shape through the Wesleyan witness, and applicable in daily life. They are the channels that have been given to us so that we can learn how to walk in the ways of God!

CHAPTER 1

What Does Grace Have to Do with Me?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT GRACE? IT'S A WORD that shows up a lot in the Bible. You've probably come across the phrase, "For by grace you have been saved through faith." That comes from Ephesians 2:8, and many Christians see it as lying at the heart of their faith.

A favorite passage of mine comes from the Gospel of John: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:14, 16). Those two verses say something important about how much God loves us. He loves us so much that he came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ to save us. But notice also how that great act of God is described. The Son is full of *grace* and truth. He has given us something described as *grace upon grace*.

If you think about what these biblical passages from Ephesians and John are saying, then it becomes pretty obvious that grace is important. You might even say that our salvation depends on it! So what exactly *is* grace?

Grace: Pardon and Power

I teach regularly about grace in churches and seminary classrooms. Regardless of the setting, I always begin by asking people what words come to mind when they think about the meaning of grace. The responses I get most often look like this: *forgiveness*, *pardon*, *mercy*, and *unmerited favor*. Those are all important terms that say something about what grace is. In the Bible, the meaning of grace might be best captured by the First Letter of John: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16 NIV).

If we want to know *why* Jesus Christ laying down his life for us is the one thing that shows us love in its purest form, then we’ll have to explore the Bible’s story of our relationship with God more deeply. But for a one-sentence statement about what God’s love is about, I’ll take that one from 1 John 3:16.

Wait—did you notice what I just did? I switched from talking about God’s grace to talking about God’s love. That happens quite a bit when we get into the biblical language about what grace is. Grace is really a word to describe how God is *for us* in every way. So it makes sense to talk about grace in terms of God’s love, because it is through God’s love that we find ourselves forgiven. We know grace when we receive pardon for our sin. Grace is pardon.

There’s another way to speak about grace as well. If forgiveness for sin is one part of what grace is, then the second way to understand grace is that it is God’s power for new life. In his second letter, Peter counsels us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus

Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). He’s talking about grace as a kind of power that allows us to grow spiritually so that we come to know Christ more fully.

The apostle Paul also talks about grace as a type of divine power. He says in Ephesians 4:7 that “to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (NIV). And the reason for giving this grace is to raise up mature leaders in the church, “to prepare God’s people for works of service”

(Eph. 4:12 NIV). Once again, we see grace being described as a kind of power for the life of discipleship.

You may have experienced grace in both of these ways. As a child, you knew when you did something wrong that things weren’t going to feel right again until your mom or dad forgave you. While the context might change as you grow older, the need to be reconciled when something goes awry doesn’t change. Whether it is a friend, your husband or wife, or a coworker, you know that you need to be forgiven when you’ve messed up in some way. Sometimes, of course, you are the one who needs to do the forgiving!

Christians who have received new birth in Christ can often speak profoundly about the sense of being forgiven by God. When grace is given and truly received in faith, then the sense of all the burden of past sin and broken relationships is lifted. Pardon for sin—the forgiveness that

“What is Grace? The Power of the Holy Ghost, enabling us to believe and love and serve God.”

—John Wesley¹

can only be found in Christ Jesus—is experienced through grace in its purest form.

What about experiencing not just the pardon but also the power of grace? The way we encounter the power of God's grace is not likely to be as momentary and sudden as it is in that first wonderful experience of forgiveness. The power of grace is most likely to be experienced as the gentle but persistent force that nurtures our growth as disciples of Jesus. In fact, John Wesley often considered grace to be just that—the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us to help us grow spiritually.² It is true that the Holy Spirit can work dramatically at certain points in our lives. On a day-to-day basis, though, the Spirit's work is going to be subtler than that and nourishing to us in ways we might not always even realize. Like the effects of good sunlight, healthy soil, and ample water in a garden, the grace given through the Holy Spirit gives us what we need to grow just the right way so that we eventually bear wonderful fruit.

What's the Big Deal about Grace?

So far I've talked a lot about how we can understand grace as it's shown to us in the Bible. But there are a couple of questions you might be asking at this point. Why do we need to be forgiven in the first place? And what kind of power does grace give me to grow that I don't have just by living in the world?

These are good questions to ask. For some people, the answers are obvious. For others, they aren't obvious at all. The need for both pardon and power from God are due to

what the Bible calls “sin.” But since a word like sin isn’t really self-explanatory, it is worth looking at how the Bible describes it. Let me do that here.

There are really two ways we can think about sin: it is both an act and a disease. The notion of sinful acts is the easier of the two for us to wrap our minds around. We’re all taught from a young age that there are things we aren’t supposed to do. *Don’t hit your sister. Stop grabbing toys away from the other children. Don’t take an extra cookie from the cookie jar.* Those are all household rules, which are established by moms and dads to teach kids right from wrong. When we grow older, we learn that there are laws that our towns and cities and states have put into place to make sure society is livable. *Obey the speed limit. Don’t steal other people’s things. Pay your taxes each year.* So young or old, we’re confronted with a world where there are certain rules or laws we’re expected to keep in obedience to the authority over us (our parents, the government). Those authorities are responsible for keeping the peace and providing a good environment in which to live. Rules are necessary for that.

The Bible teaches us that God is the creator of all things, including us. God also loves everything that he has made, which we see in a passage from Psalm 145:9 that was one of John Wesley’s favorites: “The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works” (KJV). So beyond being just the creator, God is the governor of creation as well. As governor, God has also seen the need to establish a law for his creation and especially for those special creatures that he has made in his own image—human beings. One place we see God’s law summarized is in the Ten Commandments:

The Ten Commandments

(Loving God)

1. You shall have no other gods before God
2. You shall not cast idols
3. You shall not take the name of God in vain
4. You shall honor the Sabbath and keep it holy

(Loving Neighbor)

5. Honor your father and mother
6. You shall not murder
7. You shall not commit adultery
8. You shall not steal
9. You shall not bear false witness
10. You shall not covet

God's law does more than constrain wrongdoing (although it does do that). It also shows us how to embrace all that is good. As you can see in the previous diagram, the Ten Commandments give us guidance about how to love God and how to love our neighbor.

Sin comes into the picture when we break God's law. We can do this through outward acts and we can also commit acts of the heart when we sin through our thoughts and desires. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," Psalm 51:10 says, "and renew a right spirit within me." It is a statement that recognizes the way that outwardly sinful acts usually begin as sins of the heart.

Sin is like a disease inside us as well. This may not be quite as obvious, but it explains everything about why we end up committing sinful acts at all—especially when we know such acts are wrong. Sin is like a plague that everyone in the human race is born with. The apostle Paul spoke about this in his personal testimony when he said that sin "deceived me" and "killed me" and that he had been "sold under sin." For Paul, sin was like a presence

that was constantly pressing him to do evil rather than good: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15).

When we think about sin not just as things we do but as a presence within us, we begin to understand just what a problem it is. You can’t just decide that, starting right now, you’re not going to sin anymore. It just isn’t that simple! What’s worse, sin is something that affects the whole human race. Paul told us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). That means that there isn’t anyone who is free from the predicament of sin. We are alienated from God, living broken lives in a broken world. Whether it is in our actions or our hearts, we are constantly living lives of rebellion against the One who created us and will ultimately judge us.

Grace at Work

That word—*judge*—can be a scary one. But it is another one of those terms we use to describe how God relates to us: Creator, Governor, and Judge. We do stand on the outside of God’s law because of our sin. As our judge, God should be expected to hold us accountable for our rebellion against the good and holy plan he has for our lives.

It’s here that we can come full circle to where we began, though. We started by talking about God’s grace. When we talk about grace as God’s love for us, the pardon and power of God in our lives, it all sounds great. But it’s only when we come to grips with the enormity of our sin that we truly realize why grace is necessary. Otherwise we might look at grace in a take-it-or-leave-it fashion. The truth, of course,

is that we stand in desperate need of God's grace in every possible way.

Once we understand our deep need for grace, how can we understand the way that grace actually works in our lives? After all, saying that grace is God's love for us is one thing. Understanding how we receive that love is another. I can open up my arms to receive a hug from my wife or my brother. But how do I open up my arms to receive God's grace?

Not long ago I heard Bishop Gary Mueller of the United Methodist Church present a teaching on the Wesleyan view of how grace works.³ He describes God's grace interacting with us in these three ways:

- Grace is unconditional—God comes to each of us with the message that he loves us as we are, no matter our past, etc.
- Grace is transformational—God does not leave us as we are but rather transforms our hearts and lives.
- Grace is invitational—By grace, the Lord Jesus calls and empowers us to join him in the work of the gospel.

This is a wonderful way to capture the Wesleyan sense of how grace works in our lives. *Unconditional*, *transformational*, and *invitational*—these are terms that speak to the way the Bible shows how grace works, and they also help us to think about how the Wesleyan approach takes the biblical view seriously as it relates to daily discipleship.

Grace Is Unconditional

I have a friend named Katherine who is a potter. We worked together for several summers in a program for high school youth. Katherine uses her skill in pottery to teach biblical

lessons. Sitting at her potter's wheel with her arms covered in clay, she shares stories of how God molds us like a master potter. She knows her source: the Bible speaks about God in this way. Jeremiah 18:6 says, "Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (NRSV). For my friend Katherine, the image of God as the potter and us as the clay speaks to the loving care that God has for the whole creation.

When we talk about God's grace as unconditional, we mean that God loves absolutely everything he has made. The potter does not take up the clay, mold it, and work it if he hates the clay to begin with. And that is true of God in relation to the world. God is the master potter, and we are the work of his hands. God loves us.

When we talk about grace as unconditional, what we also mean by that is that there's nothing we have to do in order to *earn* God's love. And considering how limited we are and how infinite God is, that's a very good thing! The unconditional nature of grace also means that there is no one that God excludes from his mercy. As it has often been said, this doesn't mean that all people *will* be saved but it does mean that all people *can* be saved. This universal, unconditional offer of grace is attested to throughout the Bible. The entire thrust of the New Testament message about Jesus Christ is based on this—that he came as "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2 NRSV).

Grace Is Transformational

At its heart, grace is about growth. It is about taking us from where we are to where God wants us to be. This part

of how grace affects us is summed up for me in two simple sentences:

1. Jesus Christ loves you just the way you are.
2. Jesus Christ loves you so much that he refuses to leave you the way you are.

Saying that Jesus loves us just as we are is important—it's what allows us to speak about the unconditional nature of grace in the first place. But when we go on to say that Jesus' love for us is so great that he wants to change us in some way, we are getting at the heart of the move from sin to salvation. We're now speaking about the way that God's grace is deeply transformational as well.

In the Bible, the two great themes of justification and new birth are related to the transformational power of grace. *Justification* sounds like a difficult word, but its meaning is simple. It means for something that is out of alignment to be put back right again. In this case, what is out of alignment is us. We are broken creatures. Our thoughts and deeds are often marked by sin. We have a wound within us that we don't have the power to heal on our own. To be justified by God's grace means that God puts us back in alignment with him. It means to be forgiven. This comes through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross, when it is received by us personally. Jesus had no sin, but he suffered for our sin nevertheless. And he did this out of the depths of his love for us.

The new birth is the powerful experience of spiritual regeneration that comes in the wake of our justification. If justification is really about how we are viewed in God's eyes, then the new birth is about how we come to be viewed in our own eyes. Peter refers to this great change when he

speaks about the way that God the Father “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3 NRSV). Our spiritual birth is the beginning of an ongoing growth in grace, which the Bible calls sanctification.

I know, I know. *Sanctification* sounds like another tricky term. But it’s really just another word for holiness. And in the New Testament, holiness is the word used to describe what happens to us when we are brought closer and closer to the heart of God by Jesus. We are made holy by that process.

Justification =
Being made right

Sanctification =
Being made holy

I grew up as a Methodist, but I never really heard words like *sanctification* or *holiness* during my childhood. So I was surprised to find out later that this idea was probably the most central spiritual concept for John Wesley (who, after all, was the leader of the Methodist revival). He believed that the best understanding of holiness is that it is all about love. And the book of the Bible that he thought captured holy love the best was the First Letter of John. “God’s love was revealed among us in this way,” John told us in 1 John 4:9, “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (NRSV). Coming to faith in Jesus Christ holds profound spiritual meaning. It creates a change in us; it makes us holy. “God is love,” John explained, “and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4:16b NRSV).

When we say that grace is transformational, we mean that Christ does not leave us as he finds us. Just as Jesus

made the lame to walk, the blind to see, and the dead to be raised, so too does Jesus seek to heal us as well. Grace has the ability to forgive us for the wrongs we have committed. Grace also has the ability to heal us from the tendency to do wrong and be wrong. Think about it: if God only forgave us but didn't heal us, then we'd end up right where we started in terms of our sin. Yet because the nature of grace is about both pardon *and* power, we can be both forgiven and healed!

The apostle Paul teaches us that the transforming power of grace works in our lives every day so long as we are continuing to walk in faith. "All of us," Paul said, "with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18 NRSV). Walking in the ways of God is like gazing into God's own image. When we do that, we begin to be transformed into that same image. That means that life lived in the midst of God's grace is a different kind of life than we could ever live otherwise.

Grace Is Invitational

Unconditional, transformational, and . . . invitational! What does it mean to say that grace is invitational? What is God inviting us to do by the working of his grace?

One of the great examples of invitational grace channeled through a person in my lifetime happened when I was in high school. It was the spring of 1993, and the famous college basketball coach Jim Valvano was dying of cancer. He was named as the recipient of the Arthur Ashe Courage and Humanitarian Award at the first annual ESPY Awards that year. Valvano was very sick by the time the

awards ceremony came around, but somehow he was able to make it there. His friend Dick Vitale had to help him up to the podium so he could receive his award.⁴

Jimmy V took the mic when it came time for him to speak and didn't give it back for eleven minutes. He spoke about his love for his family. He spoke about his enthusiasm for life. He brought just about everyone in the audience to tears. Toward the end of the speech Valvano said, "I just got one last thing, I urge all of you, all of you, to enjoy your life, the precious moments you have. To spend each day with some laughter and some thought, to get your emotions going. To be enthusiastic every day and . . . to keep your dreams alive in spite of problems, whatever you have."⁵

A powerful message. But he didn't stop there. He went on to urge the audience to join the fight against cancer and AIDS by getting involved and donating their time and energy and money. To make a difference somehow.

Then he ended by offering words of great assurance. He said that the cancer in his own body could only damage him so much. "It cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart and it cannot touch my soul," Valvano said. "And those three things are going to carry on forever."

I've watched the video of Jimmy V's speech many times. I've read the text of it word-for-word. The man was talking about God and about salvation. I don't know how else to understand his closing words other than as words of great faith, spoken by someone sure of his salvation in Jesus Christ. When you couple those words with his encouragement to embrace life fully, to love boldly, and to do good works in the world, I think you have the perfect image of what the invitational work of grace is all about.

I have always found it interesting that Jesus even bothered calling fishermen and tax collectors to follow him. He was the Son of God. He surely didn't need help from people who were inevitably going to get in the way more than anything else! Yet call them he did. He spent a whole lot of time teaching them and preparing them to carry out ministries of their own. When you read the stories of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—you can't escape the sense that a big part of what it means to be Jesus' disciple is to take the good news Jesus has given you and carry it out into the world so that others might come to know Jesus too.

He offers us his love so that we might be transformed. Then he invites us to carry that love to others so that they will be transformed as well.

The Purpose of the Means of Grace

Once we know this wonderful grace of God firsthand, we begin to want to encounter it in an ongoing way. God wants that as well. He has given us certain channels through which we can receive grace. They are the means of grace.

John Wesley called the means of grace “signs, words, or actions ordained of God” and “channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.”⁶ What he really meant is that they are discipleship practices that we draw from the biblical witness. Wesley saw the life of the early church as the perfect model for how the means of grace should be located at the very heart of Christian discipleship. A key Scripture passage comes from the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us what the first Christians did following their baptism: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’

teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). From this fertile ground of practical faith, many spiritual fruits were borne. Acts tells us that “awe came upon every soul,” that they met together daily and cared for one another’s material needs, and that their hearts were made glad by the rich spiritual fellowship they shared (vv. 43–46). In fact, it was through their faithful use of these means of grace that God’s gift of salvation was received. The passage concludes, “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (v. 47).⁷

So it’s no wonder that Wesley put great stock in the importance of practices like prayer, the Lord’s Supper, searching the Scriptures, and robust fellowship. When he claimed that such things were ordained by God to serve as channels of grace into the lives of believers, he could point to a pretty solid biblical precedent! Since the time of the Pentecost, these are the very ways that God has been mediating his saving grace to the church.

The way that the Acts of the Apostles speaks of the means of grace as the daily practices of the Christian community also tells us something important about how they are meant to be used in the present. As practices, they are not one-time acts that supply us with all that we need in a single moment. They are also not solitary activities that we do in isolation from others. The means of grace are, most fundamentally, practices of discipleship that we embrace in an ongoing way within the community of faith. Their power is not in the practices themselves, but rather in the grace that those practices mediate through the Holy Spirit. Yet the practices are important; when they are engaged in a disciplined way, they become holy habits that work to transform us in heart and life.

Since we are human beings who undertake meaningful activities in all areas of our lives, it only makes sense that the way God would choose to convey his grace would be through day-to-day practices. Some of these practices are *instituted* in the sense that they are clearly present in both the teaching and example of Jesus Christ. (Thus, Christ has instituted them, or put them in place, directly.) Other practices are *prudential* in character, meaning that we use the biblical witness in conjunction with our practical wisdom to figure out what they look like in our own context. Still other practices are more *general* in that they are made up of more inward, contemplative disciplines that help us to stay focused on God in our daily living. I like to think of these three main categories of the means of grace in this way:

- instituted means of grace: what we learn from Christ;
- prudential means of grace: what we learn from our context; and
- general means of grace: what we learn by contemplation.

The means of grace offer us a whole pattern for the life of discipleship. When we practice them regularly and with discipline, they also lead us to understand grace more and more. And that shows us ever more deeply how much God loves us.

This is all wonderful good news, and it leads us into the heart of what this book is about. It's in our nature to follow *something*—and grace gives us the ability to turn to Jesus Christ and follow him. Now it is time to look at the kind of life that is needed in order to truly grow toward spiritual maturity. There is a pattern to discipleship, and that pattern goes by a particular term: the means of grace.

Notes

Introduction: Looking for Direction

1. John Wesley, “The Late Work of God in North America,” ¶¶I.7, in Volume 3 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976–), 59. Future references to this edition of Wesley’s works will be cited as *Works of John Wesley*.
2. John Wesley, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, XI,” ¶¶III.6 in *Works of John Wesley* 1:674. Wesley’s entire statement is worth quoting in full: “‘Strive to enter in at the strait gate,’ not only by this agony of soul, of conviction, of sorrow, of shame, of desire, of fear, of unceasing prayer, but likewise by ‘ordering thy conversation aright,’ by walking with all thy strength in all the ways of God, the way of innocence, of piety, and of mercy.”
3. See, for example, Ann M. Graybiel and Kyle S. Smith, “Good Habits, Bad Habits,” *Scientific American* (June 2014): 39–43.
4. The patterning language that I use in this chapter and in subsequent chapters has two sources. One is from Wesley himself. Wesley often employed such language when speaking about how we should look to exemplary Christians for models of how to pattern one’s approach to the Christian life (e.g., “a pattern to the flock”). The other is more specifically about the means of grace serving as a pattern for the Christian life, which is an idea employed in various forms by Hal Knight in Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

Chapter 1: What Does Grace Have to Do with Me?

1. John Wesley, *Instructions for Children* (Newcastle: John Gooding, 1746), 7.
2. A good example of Wesley’s view of grace as the power of the Holy Spirit can be found in Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage