

MYTH 4

Grace Causes
Good Works



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But He gives a greater grace Therefore it says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

James 4:6-10

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Late one afternoon my wife and I were checking on the construction progress of the condo in which we currently live. We were on the upper floor, which has both east and west views. Peering out the back windows we could see the setting sun. Huge and bright, it hung suspended, just beginning to slip behind the horizon. Just then, we turned around and through the front window we saw a rising full moon. What a sight! Better, what a God!

For He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45).

God shows His undeserved favor or grace to all mankind.¹ Even more important, God's grace is shown through "the work of the Spirit which moves men to believe."²

Except for the Grace of God

You have heard the common expression, "Except for the grace of God, so go I!" As we see someone less fortunate than us, this

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expression often comes to mind. We are reminded of pastors, whether from television or local congregations, or even personal friends who have had affairs, and we say, “Except for the grace of God, that could be me!”

Many believers tend to think God’s favor or grace has protected them from many of life’s calamities. They might say that God’s grace works to ensure victorious Christian living, concluding “Except for the grace of God, so go I!”

Understanding Grace in Its Context

Words are understood by their use in their contexts. In the New Testament, grace (*charis*) is used 156 times and grace-gift (*charisma*) is used 16 times to address the following issues, with representative examples:

1. Experience of divine favor (Rom. 1:7; 5:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5; 2 Pet. 3:18)
2. Motivation for salvation through Jesus’ sacrificial death (Acts 15:11; Rom. 5:15; Eph. 2:5, 8; Titus 2:11)³
3. Motivation for justification before God (Rom. 3:24; Gal. 2:21; Titus 3:7)⁴
4. Endowment for ministry (Rom. 12:6; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; 12:9; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:2, 7; 1 Pet. 4:10)
5. Contrasted with the Law (Rom. 6:14; 11:6)
6. Expressed through deeds performed (2 Cor. 8:6, 19; 9:8)
7. Experience of human favor (Luke 6:32; 17:9; Acts 2:47; 24:27; 25:9)
8. Content or manner of words spoken (Luke 4:22; Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6)

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Even though not an exhaustive list, the list shows that God shows grace (His favor) to whom He chooses, particularly those in the body of Christ. This occurs first at initial salvation when He provides eternal life (Eph. 2:8) and in His bestowing spiritual gifts for ministry (1 Cor. 12:9). Following initial salvation, believers are recipients of God's favor through the ministry of the Spirit in their Christian walk. For this reason Paul typically began and concluded each of his letters with the declaration, "Grace to you" (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:3; 16:23; Gal. 1:3; 6:18). God's grace, however, is not automatically experienced. It is dependent on the believer's intimacy with Christ.

Grace Isn't Always Experienced, Though It Is Always Available

In James 4:6, James quoted Proverbs 3:34.⁵ "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." This stated contrast parallels James's argument. Starting in 4:1, James described what the "proud" are like: quarrelsome (v. 1), envious (v. 2), possessing wrong motives (v. 3), and being a friend of the world (v. 4). The proud are those who "pursue their own pleasures."⁶ God is opposed to the proud and jealously desires for His people to walk in fellowship with Him (v. 5). By contrast grace is extended to the humble, "those who put God's desires first in their lives."⁷ James painted a picture of the humble; they are those who submit to God (v. 7), resist the devil (v. 8), draw near to God (v. 8), cleanse their hands (v. 8), purify their hearts (v. 8), mourn and weep (v. 9), and humble themselves in God's presence (v. 10). The conclusion is obvious. Divine grace is constantly and readily available, but that availability is restricted. Believers must "position themselves to

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receive it [grace].”⁸ Receiving God’s grace depends on a continual walk of obedience with Christ.

Grace Isn’t a Power

Believers are saved by God, motivated by grace (divine favor), mercy, and love (Eph. 2:4-8). Rather than a power that causes salvation, grace is the motivation for the act of saving. God, not grace, “made us alive...raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him” (Eph. 2:5-6).⁹ God’s grace is also experienced when God acts with

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favor toward believers (e.g., James 4:6). This realization, however, depends on the believer’s openness as the result of an obedient walk according to the Word. God’s response depends on the believer’s deliberate choices. Believers are responsible to obey, to make the right choices.

When grace is continually described as a “force” with “power,”¹⁰ it is no wonder that the body of Christ looks to God to provide “power” to energize the believer’s walk. Re-

sponsibility for the Christian life is thus transferred to God, which is a concept foreign to the Scriptures. Other than an “endowment for ministry,” grace is not associated with empowerment of the believer. No “special empowerment” is ever provided in order for the believer to live the Christian life (see *Myth 7: Spirit’s Power Causes Christian Walk*). In fact Scripture records no instance in which God caused a believer to do anything.¹¹ On the contrary believers are continually commanded to live obediently (e.g., Col. 3:8) and are entreated to use their gifts (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:1). Choices, not special empowerment, are the hallmark of humble obedience to Christ.

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Gifts for Ministry

Of the sixteen times the word “grace-gift” (*charisma*) is used in the New Testament, the overwhelming majority of the instances refer to spiritual gifts. “A spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service.”¹² So defined, the *source* is from *God*, the *purpose* is for *service*, and the *means* for accomplishing the purpose is a divinely provided *ability*.¹³ Every believer is endowed for ministry (1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). God gives the ability for service.

God is motivated by grace. Therefore gifts do not come from grace; they come from God. As previously discussed, grace is not a power or the cause of some action. Believers are not “graced” by God; rather, God acts. God is the cause and source of an endowment for ministry.

Experiencing Grace in Christian Living

If grace is available and if grace is not a power, how is God’s grace experienced in the Christian life? In *Myth 7: Spirit’s Power Causes Christian Walk*, we will support the claim that grace does not relate to empowerment for living the Christian life. God does not dispense grace in the believer or cause behavioral change through a *gracing ministry*. Instead God ministers to the believer by means of the Spirit’s *influencing ministry*. God’s grace is experienced through obedience and through the believer’s openness to the Spirit’s filling, leading, and teaching (see *Myth 9*, *Myth 10*, and *Myth 11*).

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But does not the New Testament speak of grace being given to believers? In addition to James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5, which also

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quotes Proverbs 3:34, the phrase, “grace is given,” is employed eight times. On five occasions (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 1:4; Gal. 2:9; Eph. 3:7-8), Paul is the recipient of grace, specifically gifts. Two additional texts (Rom. 12:6; Eph. 4:7) state that grace-gifts are given to every believer in Christ. Based on the previous discussion, grace-gifts for ministry should not be confused with grace for the Christian life. The eighth occurrence of “grace-gifts” is in 2 Corinthians 8:1, which concerns the collection of money, graciously motivated contributions to support needy believers. None of these verses speaks

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of an empowerment for living the Christian life by means of a “giving of grace” or “grace works.”

We return again to James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5 where Proverbs 3:34 is quoted. “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Since obedient believers are the objects of a “giving of grace,” what do these two New Testament texts teach about God’s giving of grace and the Christian life? In Proverbs 3:33-35, Solomon presented a

set of contrasts: the wicked are cursed, but the righteous are blessed (v. 33); scoffers are scoffed, but the afflicted [the humble] receive grace (v. 34); and the wise are honored, but fools are shamed (v. 35). Blessings, grace, and honor are the possession of those who walk in godly wisdom (vv. 21-23), as they experience intimate fellowship with God (v. 32b). “For the devious [proud] are an abomination to the Lord; but He is intimate with the upright [humble]” (v. 32).

James and Peter used Proverbs 3 to explain that God’s will for His people is to walk in obedient fellowship with Him. However, there is not a hint in these texts that God dispenses grace to produce obedience. Rather, God shows His favor to those who pursue a walk of obedience. New Testament believers experience God’s favor as they

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allow the Spirit to fill, lead, and teach them. To impose a “gracing” or “zapping” by God in order for believers to live the Christian life is alien to these passages and to the entire New Testament. Believers are recipients of God’s favor through the “influencing” ministries of the Spirit.

Theological Distinctions Clarified

The various theological systems understand grace differently in relation to works. The following pages will consider the different viewpoints addressed in *Myth 1: Christian Life Views Are Similar* to see how the “manifestation of grace” aligns with the actual use of “grace” in the New Testament.¹⁴ Keep in mind that the adjectives used to describe grace (e.g., common, irresistible, assisting, operative, etc.) are merely theological terms (see Chart, *Grace of God Views* on the next page).

Roman Catholic Theology

The Roman Church teaches that the work of Christ plus the meritorious work of man result in *final* justification. Since salvation is dependent on sanctification, justification and sanctification coincide without distinction. *Justifying grace* for regeneration is freely offered to all,¹⁵ but it is “resistible and dependent on human cooperation.”¹⁶ This justifying grace “is not effectual without the sinner’s response.”¹⁷ After responding in faith to God’s justifying grace, God’s *assisting grace* in cooperation with man’s works produces final justification (i.e., eternal life). Roman theology’s assisting grace provides power to live and enables perseverance in faith and obedience until the end of one’s life.¹⁸

Reformed Theology

Contrary to Roman Catholicism, God’s grace in Reformed theology that produces regeneration is irresistible for those whom

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GRACE OF GOD VIEWS			
Theology	Justification	Sanctification	Works
Roman	Justifying (cooperation)	Assisting (cooperation)	Obtain Salvation
Reformed	Irresistible (noncooperation)	Operative (noncooperation)	Prove Salvation
Arminian	Preparatory (cooperation)	Sanctifying (cooperation)	Sustain Salvation
Free Grace A	Efficacious (noncooperation)	Empowering (cooperation)	Reveal Maturity
B	Efficacious (noncooperation)	Influencing* (cooperation)	Reveal Maturity
Cooperative = God and man working together Noncooperative = God working exclusively * Ministry, not a grace			

God calls to Himself. *Irresistible grace* is solely the work of God and requires no cooperation by man. As a result man “certainly will respond”¹⁹ since that person is rendered “willing to believe in Jesus Christ.”²⁰ Not only is cooperation excluded in justification, but the same is essentially true for sanctification as well. Reformed theology rejects the idea of assisting grace involving man’s meritorious works. In the Reformed view *operative grace* “causes” believers to perform obedient works.²¹ These works are “grace works,” the product of grace,²² because grace “supplies power to live in the Spirit.”²³ This enabling power so emphasizes the sovereignty of God that “human beings participate only incidentally”²⁴ or they do not actively participate at all.²⁵

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Arminian Theology

In Arminianism, *preparatory grace* “is dispensed to all, enabling a person to respond” by freely choosing to accept or reject Christ.²⁶ This grace is sufficient for salvation but man must cooperate with God through faith to experience salvation. During sanctification, *sanctifying grace* assists the believer through the power of the Spirit to enable righteous living.²⁷ However, “it always remains within the power of the free will to reject the grace bestowed and to refuse subsequent grace”²⁸ and salvation can be lost as a result. Since Arminian theology emphasizes human responsibility, man’s cooperative choice is required for both salvation and sanctification.

Free Grace Theology

In Free Grace theology *efficacious grace* refers to “the work of the Holy Spirit which effectively moves men to believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour.”²⁹ Contrary to Reformed theology, Free Grace proponents “object to making [salvation] and sanctification wholly the sovereign acts of God apart from human participation.”³⁰ The wooing of the Spirit either (1) “renders the individual willing to respond to the gospel”³¹ or (2) brings the individual to a persuasion that Christ alone provides life.³² Either way, belief is the responsibility of the individual at initial salvation. Also cooperation between God and man is required during sanctification, as seen in the numerous commands for Christian living in the Scriptures. “To eliminate the element of human responsibility is to carry the sovereignty of God beyond what the Bible indicates.”³³ Concerning sanctification most envision an *empowering ministry* in which God’s grace is a power that produces and causes obedience, as the believer chooses to obey God’s Word.³⁴ Other Free Grace proponents understand sanctification to be the Spirit’s *influencing ministry* on believers as they choose to obey God’s Word and are thus receptive to the filling, leading, and teaching of the Spirit (see *Myth 7: Spirit’s Power Causes Christian Walk*).

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Sorting It Out

As shown in the chart, *Grace of God Views*, whether *assisting grace*, *operative grace*, *sanctifying grace*, or an *empowering ministry*

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*Grace is merely
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are seen in sanctification, each theological position understands that grace causes and produces obedient good works through the believer. During sanctification the meritorious works of the believer are in collaboration and cooperation with God's empowering grace in most viewpoints. In Reformed theology God exclusively produces the believer's works. The end result is that in each theological position grace is synonymous with power. However, nowhere does the Bible refer to grace as a power. *Grace*

does not cause obedience. The solution to this theological dilemma is found only through understanding how the believer cooperates with the Spirit's *influencing ministry*. The Free Grace view offers the answer.

Cause or Motivation

The statement, "Except for the grace of God, so go I," is a misrepresentation of the Christian life. The correct statement should be, "Except for correct choices, so go I." Believers are responsible for their own obedience through choices made in alignment with the Word of God.

Grace may be manifested in God's actions, but grace is merely God's motivation for His actions. In the Christian walk the work

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of God is not a “gracing ministry” producing obedience; rather His work is through the Spirit’s “influencing ministries” of filling, leading, and teaching.

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1. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 55.
2. Ibid., 61.
3. Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* (St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2010), 72-73.
4. Ibid.
5. The quotation of Proverbs 2:23 in 1 Peter 5 parallels James 4:6.
6. Thomas L. Constable, *Bible Study Notes on James* (www.soniclight.com, 2010), 50.
7. Ibid.
8. Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistle of James* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1994), 95.
9. Neff, *Hold Fast*, 72-73.

“Grace is not the cause of salvation; rather it is the basis.”
10. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 90; John Piper, *The Pleasure of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1991), p. 252; Alan Schreck, *Catholic & Christian* (Cincinnati: Servant, 2004), 26; and John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 31.
11. This is not to limit God in His activities with men. Obviously God can intervene in history directly, and He can miraculously change people and their actions (e.g., to overcome an addiction or heal an affliction). The issue here is the usual (normative) manner by which God deals with His people and provides resources so that they may walk obediently in the Christian life.

The only verse that may possibly be translated “empowered by grace” is 2 Timothy 2:1. However, the preposition *ἐν*, which is often translated “by,” is better translated “in” to refer to the sphere in which one is “strengthened.”
12. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 94.
13. Ibid.

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14. Systematic theology systematizes the total revelation of God, focusing on the total structure of biblical doctrine. "Systematic theology correlates the data of biblical revelation as a whole in order to exhibit systematically the total picture of God's self-revelation....Systematic theology may include historical backgrounds, apologetics and defense, and exegetical work, but it focuses on the total structure of biblical doctrine" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986], 14-15).

In so doing, "the reasons why something was written as well as...the content of what was written" is not the major concern of systematic theology. Rather, the "whys" and the "whats" are found in the context of word usage in biblical theology. Ryrie provides perspective when he writes, "Biblical Theology is not Systematic Theology nor exegesis, nor is it merely a different arranging of the same material. Rather it is a combination which is partly historical, partly exegetical, partly critical, partly theological, and thereby totally distinctive. Biblical Theology is concerned with the reason why something was written as well as with the content of what was written. It not only examines the product but investigates the procedures and presuppositions that went into the writing of the Scriptures" [Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), p. 11.].

Biblical theology is the basis of systematic theology and therefore a requirement for accurately understanding systematic theology. However, an overemphasis on the study of systematic theology may result in deemphasizing biblical theology. The student of the Word must make sure the latter is not ignored in his pursuit of the former.

15. Alan Schreck, *Catholic & Christian* (Cincinnati: Servant, 1984), 23.
16. R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 138.
17. Ibid., 141.
18. Schreck, *Catholic & Christian*, 26, 42.
19. R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 184.
20. Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 335; and L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 436.
21. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977). 1:123.

Murray uses Philippians 2:13 ("For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure") as the supposed proof text for God *causing* good works in and through the believer. The same is

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true of James Montgomery Boice (*Foundations of the Christian Faith* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986], 428) and Anthony A. Hoekema ("Reformed Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 71). The context, however, of Philippians 2 concerns Paul's appeal for believers to obey God by a choice (v. 12), and that appeal is based on Jesus' illustration of His obedience to the Father (vv. 5-11).

22. John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 70.
23. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 31.
John Piper adds,
"Grace is power" and "the obedience which gives God pleasure is by grace" (Piper, *The Pleasure of God*, 252, italics added).
24. John F. Walvoord, "Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 223.
25. Not only does Reformed theology exclude the sinner from any responsibility at initial salvation (God's grace regenerates as well as provides faith), but also the justified person participates only passively during sanctification, as God's grace produces and causes obedience.
26. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 496.
27. Melvin E. Dieter, "Wesleyan Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 28-29.
28. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 499.
29. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 61.
30. Walvoord, "Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," 224.
31. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 335.
32. Neff, *Hold Fast*, pp. 82-86.
33. Walvoord, "Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," 224.
34. Ibid., 224-25.