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James 4:6, ESV.

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Grace: Authenticity, Variations and Units.

There is a passage from James, Chapter 4, that is very short but tells us a lot about what it means to be a Christian, and how it is that we can most fully enjoy the Christian life.

James is not a letter; it is really a homily or sermon addressed to believers in general. I want to talk about three aspects of Grace today, first, whether it is authentic, in other words a real thing or just some concept that we have made up; second, the variations of Grace that we receive from God, and yes, it's reasonable to think of Grace in multiple forms; and third, the units we can use to measure Grace. This third thing is a joke on my part, but I'm going to use it as a way of making a point. Before we look at these three aspects of Grace, I want to look at our quote from James because it tells us something foundational about Grace.

The author of James identifies himself as "*James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.*" He dedicates the document to "*the twelve tribes in the*

Dispersion.” This refers to all Jews who are scattered outside of the homeland of the Jews, Israel. But there is also a suggestion that all believers, since we do not have to be Jews, are potentially scattered all around the known world. We may live in varying cultures and speak different languages, but we are all bound together as followers of Jesus. It is widely believed that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote this book. The purpose of the book is how to live out our faith in a way that honors the principles taught by Jesus. We must persevere through all trials, and we must live with integrity. We must also be united as followers of Christ and never be divided. This is from Chapter 4:

⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Seemingly, this is obvious. God stands against the proud and arrogant and gives his Grace freely to the humble. But this is a subtly incorrect interpretation. This passage really means that God gives Grace freely to *all* people. But Grace is *not* irresistible. If we are haughty, if we lord over other people, then we will repel the Grace that God is trying to give to us. That is how we should begin our discussion of Grace. It’s easy to get, but it is easy for us to stand in the way of receiving it.

Before we look at our three aspects of Grace, I’d like to say something about butter, in particular, free butter. I was reminded of this when I was talking

to Jay about the recent issues the foodbank has been having with getting food donations. When I was in grammar school, the state of California and the federal government gave certain kinds of food to the school. Since dairy farmers were being subsidized, there was a lot of excess butter, so the school had a ton of it. We had so much that you could not get a piece of bread in the cafeteria without also having butter on it. Each slice came with a mandatory thick layer of butter.

But let's sidestep and start with 1) *The Authenticity of Grace*. It is widely believed, incorrectly, that Grace is a New Testament invention meant to characterize the free access that we have to forgiveness through Jesus, and since it is not discussed in the Old Testament, it's not a literal thing. This is wrong. The Old Testament is written mostly in Hebrew. The New Testament Greek word for Grace is "*charis*". In Genesis 6:8, we read: "*But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.*" The problem is that the word that is translated as "favor" is the Hebrew word "*hen*", which means Grace. The Old Testament often refers to Grace, and only sometimes is the word translated as "Grace". It is the same notion of Grace that we read about in the New Testament. This is from the first chapter of the Gospel of John:

¹⁶ *For from his fullness we have all received, Grace upon Grace.* ¹⁷ *For the law was given through Moses; Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*

This gives us the explanation of why Grace is more heavily focused on in the New Testament. We see that Grace is more freely given than in Old Testament times because the arrival of Christ means that unlike Noah, we do not have to earn it. Grace is real, and the big news is that God very much wants to hand it out.

Let's consider 2) *Variations of Grace*. We'll start with one specific variation or view of Grace. A cornerstone of Methodism is a notion called Prevenient Grace. This arose as a way of countering the movement of Calvinism, as originated by John Calvin. He was a French theologian who believed that God predetermined, before any humans were created, that only some people were to be saved and spend eternity with God. The notion became more extreme after Calvin died, and Calvinism became more radically focused on this notion of predestination. Calvin died on May 27, 1564, and after he died, a Dutch theologian named Jacobus Aminius, is credited with developing the notion of "Prevenient Grace" to counter the rise of Calvinism. The notion behind Prevenient Grace is that God offers salvation to everyone, not just a few, and that any person has the option of entering the Kingdom of God. John Wesley, an Anglican priest who introduced the world to Methodism, and lived from 1703 to 1791, was a huge proponent of Prevenient Grace - and it became core to Methodism. The word "prevenient" does not mean "to prevent"; rather, it means "antecedent" or "anticipatory", and the notion of

Prevenient Grace is that all people are born with Prevenient Grace inside of them, drawing them toward God, prompting them to become believers. Prevenient Grace operates on us long before we are aware of God's presence, and it is through Prevenient Grace that all people have the option of entering the Kingdom of God. No one is denied the presence of God's Grace.

There is tremendous debate about whether Prevenient Grace is biblical or if it is entirely the fabrication of humans like Arminius and Wesley. The term "Prevenient Grace" is not in the Bible. Over the centuries, we have used a handful of adjectives to refer to different kinds of Grace, but we are in truth referring to different ways of viewing the application of Grace in our lives, not to literal variations of Grace itself. To look at it more completely, in the Methodist tradition, we look at Grace from three perspectives: *Prevenient*, *Justifying*, and *Sanctifying* Grace. The existence of Prevenient Grace is a way of arguing that all people, no matter what their relationship with God, no matter what exposure they have had to Christianity or any faith tradition, do have God's Grace working within them. It prepares us to accept God at some point in our lives. It makes us open and potentially receptive. Justifying Grace refers to God's Grace in action when we accept God, and, as Christians, accept Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Justifying Grace gives us forgiveness and salvation. John Wesley used the word "pardon", drawing

a parallel between being justified in God's eyes and being set completely free from some criminal charge. While Prevenient Grace refers to God's Grace working within us from the time we are created until we accept God's forgiveness, Justifying Grace refers to an event with no duration: it happens all at once, like stepping through a door – another analogy used by Wesley. Sanctifying Grace refers to God's Grace working within us to help us become more mature as believers, to come increasingly more in alignment with God's will. The process of Sanctification continues throughout the entirety of our lives, and as Christians, this means that we are always drawing on the power of God's Grace, using it to become holier as time goes on. We cannot become completely sanctified in this life on Earth.

We can look at this from the perspective of the two great commandments of Jesus Christ. Jesus says the following in the Gospel of Matthew:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."^[a] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Prevenient Grace is what makes us curious about these two commandments and motivates us, perhaps very slowly, very incrementally, to grasp them and to make them our own. Justifying Grace pushes us over the edge, forces us to go before God and admit that we have not followed these commandments in our lives - and

makes us determined to do so in the future. Justifying Grace erases what has happened in the past, allows us to start from scratch and become dedicated to following the teachings of Jesus. Sanctifying Grace allows us to more fully, throughout the remainder of our lives, to truly live by these commandments. There are degrees of belief, in other words, and our faith can indeed become stronger. Having faith is a yes/no thing, but Sanctifying Grace allows us to live out these two commandments in more powerful ways. This gives us a goal, a way to grow, a joyful, radiant purpose for living once we have indeed become believers. I should note that Justification does take time; it does not truly happen in an instant. But it is a very focused event, unlike being impacted by Prevenient Grace or becoming sanctified.

But Jesus never differentiated three kinds of Grace. He is never even quoted as using the word in the Bible. If you have a “red letter” Bible, with the words of Jesus in red, and if that Bible is translated properly from the Greek, the word “Grace” is never printed in red. Grace is our way of visualizing the workings of God within us. Jesus, while he is never quoted as talking about Grace, talks about the Holy Spirit frequently. The two are intimately tied because it is the Holy Spirit who is responsible for administering Grace. Remember that there is only one God. The Holy Spirit is that aspect of God that lives within each of us. All of us have the Holy

Spirit living vibrantly within us once we accept God. So, another way of looking at Grace is the following: Prevenient Grace lives within all people, period; the Holy Spirit is there even if we do not know it. Once we accept God, the Holy Spirit begins to visibly live within us. We feel God active and alive in us. We have direction and motivation and inspiration. We are justified in the eyes of God. It is the Holy Spirit who plants Justifying Grace within us. It is the Holy Spirit who continues to fill us with Sanctifying Grace for as long as we live.

Other Christian denominations use different words for talking about the ways that Grace works within us. No single categorization is inherently correct or perfect. Indeed, there is only one kind of Grace. We simply use some adjectives to help us more fully understand how Grace acts within us. Grace is simply an unearned gift from God administered by the Holy Spirit.

We move now to 3) The Units of Grace. By this I mean how we measure it. Do we get feet of Grace? Gallons? Pounds? Maybe Grace is metric: meters or liters or kilograms. I'm being ridiculous. But consider butter. Remember that my school got free butter from the government, and no matter how nicely you asked, you could not get a slice of bread without a very thick layer of butter slathered on it. We took advantage of this phenomenon. We invented what became my favorite meal at school, and we made this once a week on spaghetti day. We

would get a plate of spaghetti, two slices of bread, and then put it all together to make spaghetti and butter sandwiches. We would sit at the picnic tables – which were typically coated in seagull crap, as this was near the ocean in southern California – and eat our spaghetti and butter sandwiches. We would have a great time. By the way, I once asked one of the sisters who were passing the food out why there was so much butter on the bread. She said that they weren't using it quickly enough, and if they didn't use it all, the government would give the school less butter. This certainly makes sense. Why would we want to get less of a free thing?

Grace is like that, and this is what is behind point 3), the units. It turns out that the way we measure Grace doesn't matter because it is always overflowing, always infinite in quantity. God subsidizes the creation of Grace like you wouldn't believe. There are three letters attributed to Paul that are called "Pastoral" letters, because they were written to two young pastors who needed guidance: Timothy and Titus. Many believe they were written a decade or two after Paul died, and that a follower of his wrote them. But other scholars believe that Paul did write them when he was elderly, perhaps just before being executed. Here is something that Paul or our pseudo-Paul wrote to his young protégé Timothy in the letter that we call 1st Timothy:

¹² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Our author, identifying himself as Paul, says that he had at one time been a very evil person. He had denied the Holy Spirit living within him, refused God's Grace, and persecuted followers of Jesus, hunting them down for arrest. As Saul, he would have them sent back to Jerusalem for trial. But now, as Paul – and Paul is simply the Greek or Gentile way of saying Saul – has finally accepted the Grace of God. What he has discovered is that once we accept that Grace, it is overflowing. That is how we measure Grace: it is infinite. That is the nature of God's generosity.

So, this is how to imagine Grace in your mind. Every time you accept God's Grace into your heart, you will receive a piece of bread pre-slathered with a grotesque amount of butter, so much that you cannot imagine eating any more than that. But, unlike with the government, if you ever don't accept all of God's Grace, God will not offer you less the next time. You will always be offered an infinite amount of Grace.