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Grace and freedom: the history of a difficult relationship

Traditions and Worldviews

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> *“There is free choice of will in a human being.”*

Augustine, On Grace and Free Will, chapter 2, NPNF translation. Quotations in this article are editorial English renderings through the approved Russian version, translated by its authors from that English text; they are not presented as the published translation’s wording.

About this article

Someone gives thanks for help yet says, “I did this.” Both statements can be true. But if help concerns the ability to desire goodness itself, the question deepens: whose decision is it when the possibility of making it was already given? Christian disputes about grace and freedom concern salvation, responsibility, and hope, beyond an abstract puzzle of causes.

Grace here means divine gift and action; freedom can mean absence of coercion, capacity to choose, or liberation for goodness. We will trace a selective history: Augustine, Aquinas, Orthodox synergy, Lutheran and Reformed positions, and Wesley’s response. Their differences survive the common exhortation to “believe and try.” Conversion’s beginning, human response, and good works matter. Comparisons with Stoicism, karma yoga, and Buddhist tasks clarify questions while preserving different religious aims. Modern application concerns accepting help and responsibility for action. It measures grace neither by success nor mood nor effort, and does not turn salvation into a psychological technique.

I. Different questions within one dispute

When asking whether humans are free, clarify the subject. Can they make an everyday decision? Begin moving toward salvation independently? Avoid sin? Resist divine action? Remain responsible if God knows their action beforehand? These questions are related, but different.

Grace likewise cannot be defined by one feeling. The Catholic catechism describes it as undeserved help and participation in divine life; preparation for receiving it already belongs to its action. It also distinguishes God’s free initiative from the human free response. Catechism, §§1996–2005.

Modern intuition often imagines freedom as complete independence from causes. If upbringing, an argument, or help shapes my desire, it seems less mine. Yet dependence and

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coercion differ. Reading depends on education, but each new reading does not make the reader a teacher’s puppet.

This analogy reveals the problem without resolving theology. Christian divine grace is not merely social education. The question concerns Creator and creation, sin and salvation. Still, the initial distinction prevents assuming that all help necessarily reduces freedom.

An opposite intuition says a genuine gift must make effort unnecessary. Any call to act then seems an attempt to earn it. But a gift’s cause differs from the consequence of accepting it. Undeserved help can open a new responsibility.

Reading the dispute requires retaining both dangers: salvation as payment for achievement, and gift as an excuse for inactivity. Schools offer different ways to avoid them. Fair assessment cannot first reduce each to one extreme.

II. Augustine: the will is real but not self-sufficient

In On Grace and Free Will, Augustine defends human will and the necessity of grace together. Commandments presuppose responsible action without themselves enabling salvation apart from divine help. Faith and good works give no ground for considering humans their own salvation’s independent source. Chapters 2–6, 17–20.

Two popular summaries fail. One says Augustine abolished will, leaving only divine control. Another says he merely advised helping yourself a little with God’s support. Both diminish the problem. Dependence is more radical than ordinary assistance, yet human action is not fictional.

The beginning of good desire is especially significant. We might accept help in successful action but reserve the first good impulse entirely for ourselves: first I wanted rightly, then God helped. Augustine questions this distribution too. The dispute moves from supplementary strength to conversion’s source.

Difficult questions follow, which no consoling conclusion should close. Why does one receive gracious action while another does not? How can predestination and responsibility be described together? Augustine’s thought developed in varying polemical circumstances. One late treatise cannot represent its entire history or subsequent responses.

Readers today should not turn this language into judgment of an individual. Difficulty completing a task does not establish an absence of grace. Intense guilt does not prove holiness. Theology of sin and will cannot diagnose another’s exhaustion or declare it moral refusal.

Augustine's seriousness lies in rejecting simple self-salvation. Humans may need more than information: a changed ability to desire and love. This observation does not make his religious account a universal psychological theory of behavior, applicable to every person and every difficulty. The religious subject remains religious even where readers recognize a familiar human difficulty and find its language illuminating for their own experience.

III. Aquinas: kinds of goodness and kinds of help

Aquinas does not hold that without sanctifying grace humans cannot perform any good human act. Discussing grace's necessity, he distinguishes good proportionate to nature from humanity's supernatural end. Natural capacities after the fall are damaged, not wholly destroyed. Preparation to receive grace also requires divine movement. Summa Theologiae, I–II q.109, a.2 and a.6.

This blocks the crude conclusion that nonbelievers cannot build houses, care for others, or do good. Aquinas asks something more specific: do natural powers suffice for all moral goodness and an end exceeding nature? Describing ordinary kindness and grounding independent salvation are different steps.

"Natural" does not mean insignificant. Imagine discussing someone who helped a neighbor obtain necessary food. One participant recognizes the benefit but dismisses it: the act proves no independent salvation. Another considers it sufficient to refute grace's necessity. Both overreach. The act's value to its recipient and natural powers' sufficiency for a supernatural end concern different evaluations. A negative answer to the second does not cancel a positive answer to the first.

Nor is every kind of help an interchangeable resource. Advice, teaching, and extra time perform specific tasks by changing conditions for a particular undertaking. Grace in this theological question concerns salvation and the human relation to God. Successful learning can clarify why dependence need not mean coercion; it cannot establish grace's sufficiency or dispensability. This boundary preserves human assistance's value without making it prove the entire theological answer.

The structure of causation matters too. Divine and human action need not compete on one level. More divine action does not automatically mean less human action. Two workers dividing a finite task into percentages provide an unsuitable model for the asserted relation between a primary source and human agency.

Readers may still ask whether a real alternative remains and in what sense will is free. This is a legitimate philosophical question. The presence of "freedom" in a text cannot answer it alone. Causes, desire, and coercion require specific distinctions.

Nor can Aquinas become the author of “grace is fifty percent, effort the remaining fifty.” Undeserved initiative is not half a transaction. Human participation is itself understood within dependence on a given possibility.

Modern reading can learn disciplined differentiation. Inability to reach one end independently is not inability to do any good. Acknowledging damage does not devalue all nature. These distinctions support careful speech, though the supernatural end exceeds contemporary accounts of resources and skills.

IV. Orthodox synergy: participation in a gift

Synergy means working together. Orthodox theological language uses it for participation in divine action and a free human response. It does not mean two equal powers producing salvation as a commercial result.

In John Breck’s reflection published by the Orthodox Church in America, synergy concerns living in accordance with salvation’s gift. Ascetic actions do not buy salvation. Human response and changed living nevertheless remain significant. Salvation Is Indeed By Grace.

Synergy presents a recognizable difficulty: how real must a response be without becoming merit preceding the gift? “Cooperation” cannot settle this beforehand. It indicates a direction requiring development. Orthodox authors can explain freedom, grace, and ascetic effort differently.

Nor should Orthodoxy be made Augustine’s complete opposite or deprived of a doctrine of grace. That division creates convenient psychological cultures: an East supposedly trusting people and a West considering them helpless. Actual traditions contain more intersections and disagreements. Compare specific propositions rather than impressions.

In ordinary conversation, watch whether synergy’s language becomes pressure. Someone may participate voluntarily in spiritual discipline. Another’s difficulty does not justify “You simply failed to cooperate enough with God.” This appropriates knowledge of inner life and may conceal illness, unavailable help, or unsuitable conditions.

Theologically, participation requires a serious response. Human conversation must also refrain from deciding that response for another. Respect for freedom appears in how possibilities are discussed: hearing refusal, clarifying conditions, allowing revision. This is a modern ethical implication, not an exhaustive translation of Orthodox teaching.

V. Reformation: works matter without purchasing justification

Protestant teaching cannot become “Do nothing; just believe.” The Augsburg Confession describes justification as a gift through faith for Christ’s sake, while new life should bear good fruit. Works do not ground a claim to justification before God. Augsburg Confession, articles IV–VI.

Justification and moral change relate, but their precise relation matters. Works as fruit does not mean unnecessary works. Works without being a price does not mean behavior lacks consequences. The cause of acceptance and the accepted person’s way of life are different questions.

The Reformed line develops freedom and divine initiative in its own way. The Westminster Confession does not describe will as forcibly coerced. After the fall, humans cannot turn to saving good by their own powers; grace liberates them to will and act freely. Chapter IX.

This is not everyday fatalism. “Everything is settled, so every action is pointless” fails to convey the document. Yet differences from synergistic descriptions cannot be dismissed as verbal. Saving conversion and resistance to a particular action of grace remain substantive issues.

Lutheran and Reformed traditions must already be distinguished within Protestantism. They are not one teaching under different names. This limited map does not extend a particular confession to all Baptists, Anglicans, Pentecostals, or independent congregations.

Readers may recognize a familiar fear: if accepted without merit, will I lose motivation to improve? Theological responses suggest acting from acceptance rather than purchasing it. Recognizability does not equate religious justification with psychological unconditional approval. Christianity includes Christ, sin, and relation to God; these cannot quietly disappear.

VI. Wesley: preceding help and a real response

John Wesley illustrates internal Protestant difference. In On Working out our own Salvation, he discusses prevenient grace: movement toward God does not begin wholly without divine gift. God’s action enables human action without excusing inactivity. Sermon 85, II.1 and III.

This does not restore independent self-salvation. The gift’s priority remains, but human response is explained differently from strict Reformed accounts. Protestantism therefore cannot mean one choice against free participation. Wesley’s example alone unsettles the simple scheme.

Wesley discusses spiritual life through particular duties and practices. Gift relates to what someone does next. Modern readers may feel support and demand together. Remember the

sermon’s historical and religious setting: its exhortations are no ready program for everyone in every condition.

Capacity to respond differs from guaranteed successful response. An available possibility is not inevitably used. Grace’s language therefore does not always yield one account of the final outcome. Traditions discuss perseverance, falling away, and assurance differently; a common term has not settled everything.

Suppose someone receives an accessible opportunity to correct a mistake. They may accept, refuse, or postpone it. Assistance and responsibility coexist. This does not prove Wesley’s teaching or make every helper a bearer of divine grace; it clarifies the question’s form.

Internal variety helps examine freedom’s meaning: independence from every gift, capacity to respond, absence of external coercion, or a changed ability to desire good? Unless distinguished, identical words with different contents fight each other.

VII. Predestination, knowledge, and control

Grace easily joins another question: if God knows the future, can humans act otherwise? Knowledge must not replace causation. A known action and a coerced agent are logically different. This distinction alone, however, does not resolve necessity and alternative possibilities.

Divine determination extends beyond foreknowledge. If God not only knows but acts as salvation’s source, how is participation described? Answers depend on causation, time, will’s nature, and purpose. Combining a few isolated remarks about fate cannot yield a single Christian position; the particular account of the will, causation, and salvation must remain visible.

Distinguish theological predestination from felt helplessness too. Someone may believe nothing can change because of real coercion or scarce resources. That situation establishes no metaphysics. Another lives actively within belief in divine purpose; activity does not automatically refute faith.

Suppose someone says, “If everything depends on God, I will not repay my debt.” This confuses existence’s source, salvation, and a particular obligation. Neither grace nor an unknown future cancels a promise and its consequences. Avoiding an obligation requires another argument; a spiritual formula cannot do that work.

Conversely, someone sees every failure as personal inadequacy because “a free person could always do better.” Freedom becomes omnipotence. Responsible people still inhabit circumstances they do not fully control. Recognizing control’s boundary does not abandon responsibility.

Ask what is actually available instead of deriving every present possibility from an enormous metaphysical formula. Theology retains its significance; practical choice also needs a concrete account of circumstances, participants, and limits.

VIII. Gift cannot be measured by mood or success

It is tempting to see grace in pleasant feelings or favorable outcomes. Success then confirms spiritual correctness, while failure signals divine absence. This seemingly clear scheme owes its clarity to numerous unsupported conclusions.

Catholic exposition explicitly warns against inferring justification and salvation solely from feelings or works. Catechism, §2005. This particular confessional statement reveals a broader problem: human condition is no transparent instrument for measuring the supernatural.

Suppose relief after prayer seems a sign to take a risky decision. The relief occurred as an experience. The decision’s content needs separate examination. Calm can accompany error; anxiety can accompany an accurate perception. Feeling and grounds for action differ.

Judging others this way is still more problematic. Illness, poverty, or doubt do not reveal someone’s state of grace to outsiders. Even where a tradition gives suffering spiritual meaning, its particular meaning is not known to every commentator. Attribution can wound and obstruct ordinary help.

Good works are no infallible ledger either. Actions matter, but listing them does not expose all inner life. People may perform necessities with mixed motives while providing real benefit. This preserves the act’s value while limiting claims about the agent’s entire religious standing.

Readers can discuss observable consequences: was a promise fulfilled, harm reduced, a possibility opened, another person heard? Such questions do not measure salvation. They support responsibility without passing finite human information off as knowledge of God’s judgment.

IX. Testimony, formula, and an actual position

A theological formula differs from a life story. Saying everything was received through grace may express gratitude, recall an unexpected turn, or deny sole authorship of goodness. Listen carefully. It does not automatically reveal a theory of predestination. Testimony about help is not a treatise on causes; gratitude does not cancel efforts the speaker simply omitted.

The reverse error turns school terminology into accusation. One says, “I must cooperate”; another, “Grace does everything.” Before calling the first arrogant or the second passive, ask what they mean. The first may consider the capacity to respond already given. The second

may care for others daily without making this salvation's foundation. Actions and precise clarification often show more than two isolated formulas.

This leaves doctrinal differences intact but changes conversation's order: establish the actual claim, then compare. Otherwise agreement costs an empty shared word, or conflict arises between positions nobody held. Neither serves intellectual history. Serious comparison hears both what a tradition asserts and the error it tries to prevent: self-salvation, coerced will, fruitless faith, trading merits, or irresponsible inactivity.

Everyday speech thereby gains demanding discipline. Accounts of grace should not divide people into worthy and unworthy. Another's difficult path establishes no absence of divine help; one's successful path establishes no correctness of every decision. Respect someone's religious explanation while examining facts, consequences, and responsibility separately. Gratitude deepens when it is not tasked with providing proof it cannot supply.

X. Freedom able to receive

Grace and freedom's history ends in no convenient midpoint. Augustine, Aquinas, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, and Wesleyan answers differ genuinely on conversion's beginning, response, good action's source, and perseverance. "Believe and try" removes the dispute's subject.

Careful reading reveals a shared tension: humans respond without independently originating everything through which they respond. Christianity relates dependence to God and salvation. An everyday limited analogy recalls language, others' labor, support, and conditions without which choice could not occur.

Recognizing what is received does not reduce every action to outside control. Recognizing agency does not make life solitary merit. Between these extremes, actual possibilities and responsibility can be discussed without declaring theology settled.

Someone can thank others and honestly say, "I did this." A harder, more mature formulation adds, "I did this with what I received, and am responsible for using it." It does not replace grace's doctrine. It preserves a human space where gift excuses neither pride nor helplessness and invites more attentive living.

What this means in practice

Start with language. In "I must cope myself," what does "myself" mean? No replacement of your decision, no help whatsoever, or no acknowledgment of dependence? These demands differ. Sometimes someone wants to preserve choice but tries to preserve complete isolation.

Suppose someone made a work mistake. Offered help correcting it, they refuse because correction would no longer count as their achievement. Separate responsibility for the mistake, help with correction, and authorship of the next decision. Accepting information or extra hands need not surrender will.

Conversely, someone accepts support and expects the helper to guarantee the entire outcome. Gift becomes a demand. Support may open a possibility, but does not automatically control your own action, the surrounding circumstances, or what other participants will choose to do. Clarify which part of the decision remains yours.

For Christian reading, map three questions: what does the author consider gift, human response, and the response's fruit? Fill this from Augustine's, Aquinas's, or Wesley's texts, rather than a school's reputation. Record differences separately. Difference is comparative reading's result, not its defect.

A small step might accept particular help under clear conditions or fulfill a duty nobody can perform for you. No religious designation as gracious is necessary. Describe and check it ordinarily: what was done, what remains, what result appeared?

Faith-related inquiry can continue in your community or particular theological works. This article determines no spiritual status or denomination. It reduces confusion: help need not remove freedom, effort need not purchase acceptance, and dependence gives no right to evade an action's consequences.

Key quotation

> *"Works arise from faith."*

Augustine, On Grace and Free Will, chapter 17, NPNF translation. Editorial English rendering through the authors' approved Russian version. The fragment concerns faith's relation to works without abolishing will. Both quotations come from one treatise preserving will alongside the gift's priority.

Connections across traditions

These analytical comparisons identify a shared question and a boundary between answers; they do not themselves establish historical influence.

Question	Positions and sources	Actual similarity	Boundary of comparison
Will and necessary help	Augustine, chapters 2–6 and Aquinas, I–II q109 a2, a6	Human action remains while self-sufficient salvation is denied.	Aquinas distinguishes natural good and the supernatural end more explicitly; one late treatise cannot represent Augustine's entire corpus.
Responding to a preceding gift	John Breck, synergy and Wesley, Sermon 85, III	Participation does not purchase the original gift.	Orthodox and Wesleyan accounts belong to different theological histories; resemblance preserves differences concerning salvation.
Freedom and uncontrollable outcomes	Westminster Confession, IX and Epictetus, §1	Freedom does not mean power over every external event.	The Reformed document concerns saving liberation through grace; Epictetus concerns one's action and judgment, not Christian justification.
Goodness without trading for results	Augsburg Confession, VI and Gita, II.47–48	Action can be evaluated without making it the price of a desired reward.	Faith's fruits and nonattachment to action's fruit address different religious aims; karma yoga is not Lutheran justification.
Distinguishing spiritual tasks	Aquinas, I–II q109 and SN 56.11	Our comparison highlights distinctions among end, capacity, and required action.	The four truths' tasks and Aquinas's supernatural end differ; the sutta asserts no salvation through a Creator's grace.

Sources

• Catechism of the Catholic Church. Grace, §§1996–2005: gift, preceding help, free response, and limits of inference from feelings.

• Augustine. On Grace and Free Will, chapters 2–6 and 17–20: will, grace, faith, and works.

• Thomas Aquinas. Summa Theologiae I–II, q.109, a.2 and a.6: natural good and grace's necessity.

• John Breck. Salvation Is Indeed By Grace, Orthodox Church in America: synergy and ascetic response to gift.

• Augsburg Confession, articles IV–VI: justification and faith's fruits.

• Westminster Confession, chapter IX, published by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: free will and grace's saving action.

• John Wesley. On Working out our own Salvation, Sermon 85, II–III: prevenient grace and human participation.

• Epictetus. Enchiridion, §§1, 5, translated by Elizabeth Carter: one's action and judgment distinguished from external circumstances; comparing responsibility's grounds without equating Stoic and Christian ends.

• Bhagavad Gita, chapters II–III, translated by Edwin Arnold, The Song Celestial, 1900 edition: action without attachment to its fruit, II.47–48 and III.4–9; comparing effort and outcome without equating karma yoga and Christian grace.

• Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, SN 56.11, translated by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: an early Buddhist text on distinct tasks of the path, not Christian grace.

Tags

grace, freedom, free will, Christianity, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, synergy, cooperation, Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Reformed tradition, Wesleyanism, John Wesley, justification, sanctification, prevenient grace, predestination, natural good, supernatural end, gift, faith, good works, responsibility, action, causation, help, karma yoga, Stoicism, comparative theology

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