

## (01-12-24) The Means of Grace (1)

### The Presence of God in the Christian Life

Galatians 5:16-26

As we begin the new year, we need to prepare our hearts to live out God's call faithfully and live up to the Gospel message uncompromisingly. We have to be intentionally aligned with God's heart, persistently obey His word, and sincerely follow the nudges of the Holy Spirit so that we do not stagnate but grow spiritually and may be constantly transformed in God's grace, and wisely deal with all the challenges and problems we may face this year.

That is why we are starting a new sermon series titled *The Means of Grace*. In a broad sense, the means of grace is a Methodist way of discipleship, spiritual formation (a lifelong process of deepening one's relationship with God and becoming more Christ-like), and sanctification.

**To begin with, let us start by revisiting the meaning of grace.**

“Grace is the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit. Grace is God's presence to create, heal, forgive, reconcile, and transform human hearts, communities, and the entire creation.” There are some lessons we have to hold onto from this definition. First of all, grace is a gift from God. So, we need to long for and pray for God's grace in our lives. Second, grace is the work of the Holy Spirit. If you find God's grace in your lives, you will experience the power of the Holy Spirit. Finally, grace is God's loving and transforming presence through the Holy Spirit. The transformation of our lives is activated and sustained by God's loving action through the Holy Spirit. That is why God commands us to live by the Spirit. Let us read the following scripture together.

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.” (Galatians 5:16-17 NRSV).

We are constantly in spiritual warfare. There are two ways of life we can choose from: Life walking by the Holy Spirit or life carrying out the desires of the flesh. We have to be guided by the Holy Spirit at all time. If not, we can easily fall into **sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and similar behaviors.** (The Works of the Flesh or The Practices of Sinful Nature, Galatians 5:19-20).

That is why John Calvin said, “The human heart is a perpetual idol factory.” We have to examine our hearts consistently, demolish the desires of our flesh, and rebuild an altar for our God.

Let me quote Dallas Willard on the need for our changed hearts:

“The greatest need you and I have—the greatest need of collective humanity—is renovation of our heart. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices, and actions come has been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed. Indeed, the only hope of humanity lies in the fact that, as our spiritual dimension has been formed, so it also can be transformed.” (Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (2002), 14).

That is why we need the means of grace.

### **Then what is the meaning of the means of grace?**

“The means of grace are ways to receive God's grace, in other words, to experience God's loving and transforming presence so that we grow in our faith and intimacy with God; by doing so, we are renovated to form Christ's character in us with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16 NRSV). The command, “Live by the Spirit,” involves intentional, persistent, and diligent use of the means of grace.

In our Methodist tradition, John Wesley and his followers emphasized the importance of practicing the means of grace. It was because he was earnest about transforming and sanctifying people's lives by practicing means of grace. “In Wesley's time, if you were a Methodist, you practiced the means of grace.

### **Then what types of means do we have today?**

The means of grace can be divided into two categories: Works of Piety and Works of Mercy. Traditionally, mercy is another name for the mission. Each category also has individual and communal aspects of practices.

#### **Works of Piety**

Individual Practices – prayer, reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others

Communal Practices – regularly share in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study

## Works of Mercy

Individual Practices - doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others

Communal Practices – seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination (for instance, Wesley challenged Methodists to end slavery), and addressing the needs of the poor

As we practice the means of grace, we may experience God’s loving and powerful presence for our healing, renewal, and transformation. We can be more sensitive to what God is doing in our lives and develop the desire for God’s Kingdom. We will confirm our belonging to Christ by crucifying our flesh along with its passions and desires. We will be guided by the Holy Spirit. We will love God and our neighbors more deeply. We will be formed into the image of Christ more perfectly by having his character as our character.

Let us read the scripture on the screen together.

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” (Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV)

The fruit of the Spirit is a character of Jesus Christ formed by the loving and transforming power of the Holy Spirit. As you can see, the noun “fruit” here is not plural but singular. This means that all the different characters of Jesus represent a single essence, which is love.

Joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control stem from love. They are different colors of love expressed in and through the actions of the Holy Spirit.

I hope and pray that Carleton United Methodist Church can bear the fruit of the Spirit abundantly as God invites us to participate in His Son’s character.

We gave out small notebooks with the message of *Emmanuel* on their covers at the Christmas Eve service. Please try to record your God moments so that you can confirm, enjoy, and appreciate God’s loving and transforming presence in your lives this year.

As we continue our new sermon series, *The Means of Grace*, I’d like you to start to practice the means of grace or add more means of grace to your routine lives intentionally and regularly. By doing so, I hope and pray that we grow in our ability to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and our neighbors as ourselves. Our sanctification depends on how we practice the means of grace.