

f(01-19-24) The Means of Grace (2)

Prayer

Ephesians 3:14-21

As we continue our new sermon series, The Means of Grace, let us revisit the meaning of the means of grace.

“The means of grace are ways (or vehicles) 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.”

And the following are the types of means of grace we recognize in our denomination today.

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

Then what is the most important means of grace here?

According to John Wesley, the most important means of grace is prayer. John Wesley said, “Prayer is the grand means of drawing near to God” (Letter to Miss March, 3–29–1760); it is “the breath of our spiritual life” (NT Notes, I Thes. 5:16).”

Let me show you a picture of the sign that I took at our church. It says, “Do not worry about anything. Instead, pray about everything.” This sign reflects a lesson I learned from my chaplain in my military service.

When I tried to apply for a seminary in the United States, I was an exchange student at Slippery Rock University in Pennsylvania. This was after my mandatory military service in South Korea. I wanted to meet my chaplain, who was stationed in Killeen, TX. It took more than 35 hours from Slippery Rock, PA, to Killeen, TX, by Greyhound at that time. But I had a wonderful time with him and his wife for a week during my Thanksgiving break in 1997. Before returning to Slippery Rock, I asked him several questions about my future. “CH. Higgins, I have some options in choosing a seminary after college. Which one do you think

I should go to?” He said, “Jung, pray to God. He will answer your prayer.” I asked him again, “What kind of concentration do I have to take in the Master of Divinity program?” He replied, “Jung, pray to God. He will let you know.” Finally, I asked him, “CH Higgins, do you think I need to take my ordination process in the Korean Methodist church or the United Methodist church? What is your recommendation?” By the way, he was an ordained elder from the United Methodist church. This time, he didn’t say anything. Instead, he pointed to the sky. I said, “Yes, I have to pray to God.” Although I knew I should pray first, I tried to depend on him instead. That day, I learned the rule of prayer again: Before you ask people, trust God and ask God first.

He passed away in 2012 in Blackwell, Oklahoma. Let me show you a picture of his tombstone. At the bottom of it, he included a part of his favorite scripture from Proverbs 3:5. “**Trust in the Lord with all your heart.**” He always preferred using NKJV. In his obituary, I could find the complete verses of Proverbs 3:5-6. Let us read the Scripture together. “**Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths.**” *Proverbs 3:5-6 (NKJV)*. I feel like he is still reminding me to trust God and seek God's guidance first.

I'd like to quote Samuel from the Bible on his understanding of prayer.

“**But me? I would never sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you. I will teach you what is good and right.**” (1 Samuel 12:23 CEB).

For Christians, prayer is not an option but a vital responsibility and a cornerstone of our relationship with God as God’s faithful servants to reveal God’s righteousness. Through prayer, we align ourselves with God's will, seek His guidance, and intercede for others. So, praying for others is an expression of God’s loving heart through us to those who are the objects of our prayers.

Today’s Scripture teaches us to pray for love and power as our prayers center around the Kingdom of God.

First, our prayer has to reflect our confidence in God’s redemptive work for the world, maintaining our eternal Kingdom perspective.

“**For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory ... I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints ...**” (Ephesians 3:14-16a, 18 NRSV)

When the Apostle Paul said, “**For this reason,**” he emphasized that through the Gospel of Christ, Gentiles have become heirs alongside Israel, members of one body, and share in eternal life in Christ (Ephesians 3:4 & 6). Apostle Paul did not overlook God’s redemptive work for all people in his prayer; He saw his imprisonment in Rome as a way to participate in God’s salvation work for all

nations. Furthermore, as Apostle Paul prayed for his church, he fixed his mind on God's universal church not only in all nations but also in heaven. We are not alone. There are so many other churches in the world and even in God's Kingdom that glorify, worship, and pray to God. Our prayers are part of a larger community. This concept can be understood as the eternal perspective of prayer or the Kingdom perspective of prayer.

That is why Apostle Paul was able to pray according to the riches of God's glory, even though he was in weakness, losing freedom. But he was freed in the Holy Spirit as he fully depended on the riches of God's glory. That was the starting point of his prayer for his church, overcoming his weakness and difficulty.

Secondly, we have to pray for the renovation of our hearts, which means our spiritual maturity and transformation.

"I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." (Ephesians 3:16-17 NRSV)

Renovating our hearts means bearing the fruit of the Spirit - **"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."** (Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV). Here, the fruit of the Spirit is one single fruit, which is love. Others are different expressions or aspects of this single fruit, love.

Today's scripture reminds us that the renovation of our hearts is the work of the Holy Spirit, alongside our faith in Jesus Christ. This means that we must be intentional in our desire for transformation and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. One way to do this is by kneeling before God—intentionally, persistently, individually, and collectively.

Finally, we have to know that there is always room for us to grow in our ability to know the love of Christ.

"I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3:18-19 NRSV)

What does **"you may be filled with all the fullness of God"** mean in the Scripture? We are in the process of becoming all that God created us to be. Just as God is perfect, we, too, will be perfect one day. Our spiritual maturity and transformation is a life-long process that can be carried out through our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our effort to grow in our ability to love our Lord and neighbor is not just an individual journey but also a communal one. The same is true for prayer. Let me show you a picture I took a few months ago when I began my ministry here. Let me read it to you:

“What Would Happen If a Whole Community Prayed?” Not just Sunday morning prayers, but every morning. What would happen if each of us started praying for one area of ministry that was of personal interest to us? There is power in prayer ... are you willing to see what will happen when a whole congregation prays? Are you willing to pray each day for one area of ministry for the next 6 months? What could and would God do with a whole congregation in prayer? We'll never know if we don't try!”

I hope and pray that we will begin to kneel before God regularly, persistently, and fervently so that we may experience God's immeasurable love and power more and more. The transformation of the world must begin with the renovation of our hearts.