

THE MEANS OF GRACE

THE WONDERFUL BENEFITS OF GOD'S SAVING AND SANCTIFYING GRACE

> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain;
> but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me."
> **1 CORINTHIANS 15:10**

INTRODUCTION:

God uses many different means to bring people to Himself for *salvation*, *fellowship, and growth in Christlikeness*. In the widest sense, these are called "the means of grace." Louis Berkof places these means of grace in the proper perspective when he says,

> "Fallen man receives all the blessing of salvation out of the eternal fountain of the grace of God, in virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ and through the operation of the Holy Spirit. While the Spirit *can* and *does* in some respects operate immediately on the soul of the sinner, *He has seen fit to bind Himself largely to the use of certain means in the communication of divine grace*. The term 'means of grace' is not found in the Bible, but it is nevertheless a proper designation of the means indicated in the Bible."[1]

Reformed Theology has largely limited the phrase "means of grace" to two vehicles: the Word of God and the sacraments. In Reformed theology, the sacraments are *baptism* and *the Lord's Supper*. However, if we are to understand the means of grace more comprehensively and practically, we must open our lens wider before we narrow it for practical application. Let's begin with God.

GOD OPERATES BY MEANS

According to Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, a means is "*the medium through which anything is done: a means to an end*." Just as means are necessary to arrive at a desired end, God has means to accomplish His purposes in the world and in our lives. Although God uses means, He does not use *any* means. He has revealed particular means—both visible and invisible, divine and earthly—through which the Holy Spirit communicates to us the benefits of Christ's redemption. Four factors unpack its meaning.

[1] Louis Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, repr. 2017), 516.

First, God has established the means of grace with His end in mind. John Owen, who is recognized as the tallest redwood among the English theologians, once said,

> "The end is the first principle moving cause of the whole; the means are all those things which are used for the attaining of the end proposed…[and] every duty of the Christian life is, therefore, a means of grace."

The chief end of God's means is *the glory of God*. God's glory captures the supremacy of God in everything. God's glory is like a multi-faceted gem that reflects and refracts light in ever-new, ever-unexpected ways as it is admired. It has direct implications for our lives. Since everything exists for God's glory, we exist for God's glory as well. The Psalmist wrote, *"Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to Your name give glory" (Ps.115:1)*.

Second, God has an appointed means for everything He does. He has an appointed means for saving sinners *(Acts 4:12)*, for stimulating saints *(Heb.10:25)*, for identifying and affirming qualified leaders *(1 Tim.3; Tit.1)* for sending missionaries to the field *(3 John 6-8)*, for dealing with sin in His church *(Matt.18)*, for dealing with wayward children and a disobedient spouse in marriage *(1 Pet.3:1ff)*.

Third, God has various means of grace. Some are *unseen* or mysterious agencies like providence, which Spurgeon described as "plowed fields…cooperating with the ministry of grace." God also has *seen* agencies like ordinary living, talents, upbringing, and relationships. There are *earthly* means like the church and ministry functions (pastor, elder, deacon), as well as *heavenly* means like the Holy Spirit and the aid of angels. However, in addition to these facts about means, remember…

Finally remember, the biblically prescribed way that God has chosen to do His work is THROUGH means.

- God can work AGAINST means. For example, you can read the Scriptures to find help or relief, but instead of softening your heart, God can use it to harden your heart because of the practice of known sin *(2 Thess.2:11-12)*.

- God can work WITHOUT means. For example, God can reveal truth directly to the mind through His chosen divine agency, without the use of Scripture, as he did with the Patriarchs *(Heb.1:1ff)*.

- God can work ABOVE means. For example, you can plant seeds in a garden and provide the appropriate amount of water and care, but above and beyond what you planted, God will affect its outcome—not by producing something else, but something less or greater *(1 Cor.3:6-7)*.

- God can work DESPITE means. For example, you have a headache, so you take a Tylenol to ease the pain, but it doesn't go away because, like David, the mental anguish and physical affliction are not because of your head; it's because of the sin in your heart that you have refused to acknowledge and repent of *(Ps.32:3-5)*.

Charles Bridges reminds us of the balance.

> "We do not limit the infinite extent and power of Divine grace, when we speak of the necessity of Christian ministry. These uses of the sacred institution are not and cannot be necessary to God, as if He were unable to work without them. But they are such as He has appointed and made necessary…for the accomplishment of His own purposes."

PAUSE and MEDITATE—How does this shape your thinking? Move your heart? Influence your will?

WE GROW BY THE PROPER AND PRAYERFUL USE OF GOD'S MEANS

What are the means that God has appointed for our growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ?

1. **The Word of God** *(2 Tim.3:16)*—The Word of God represents itself to us as a means of grace in various ways, under various symbols. The Bible is a *"hammer which shatters a rock" (Jer.23:29)*, a *judge* of *"the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb.4:12)*, *a mirror* to reveal the true condition of man *(James 1:25)*, *a laver* for the washing of the defiled *(John 15:3; Eph.5:26)*, *seed (Luke 8:11; 1 Pet.1:23)*, *food for the hungry (Job 23:12)*, *a lamp for the traveler (Ps.119:105)*, and *a sword for the soldier (Eph.6:17; Heb.4:12)*. It *saves (Rom.1:16; 1 Cor.1:21)*, *sanctifies (John 17:17)*, *restores (Ps.19:7)*, and *leads to success (Josh.1:8)*.

2. **Prayer** *(Heb.4:16)*—No one can read the Bible without being impressed with the large place given to prayer in its pages. Prayer is not only held out as a *privilege* but as a *command (Gen.18:22ff; 1 Sam.12:23; 2 Kin.19:15; Ps.5:2; 32:6; Jer.29:7; Matt.5:44; Luke 18:1; 1 Thess.5:17; 1 Tim.2:8; James 5:13-16)*. Ezra regarded prayer more important than a band of soldiers and horsemen *(Ezra 8:21-23)*. Christ regarded it as more necessary than food or sleep *(Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12)*, and the apostles placed it on the same level as preaching *(Acts 6:4)*.

3. **Humility** *(James 4:6)*—Proverbs 3:34 is quoted by both James *(4:6)* and Peter *(1 Pet.5:5-7)*. It sets before us the strong graphic picture of God's determination to stand against the proud, and His delight to enrich the humble. The word "oppose" pictures God singling out the proud as His grand enemy and setting Himself in battle array against them. The reason God is so opposed to the proud is that they break the ranks that He sets men in, rise in rebellion against Him, and do what they can to dethrone His authority.

   On the other hand, God *"gives grace,"*—that is to say, *He pours out, enriches, and empowers*—to *the humble with enabling power to love Him and fulfill their duties toward Him*. Humility is not simply feeling small and useless—like an inferiority complex. It is sensing how great and glorious God is and seeing yourself in that light. J.C. Ryle once said, "Of all garments, none is so graceful, none wears so well, and none is so rare, as humility." Humility is *the mark of saving grace (Matt.5:5)*. Humility is *a requirement of spiritual fitness for leadership (1 Tim.3:6)*. God has a special regard for the humble *(Is.66:2)*.

4. **The Lord's Supper** *(1 Cor.11:1ff)*—Paul explained that the three-fold purpose of the Lord's Table is *a table of reflection (11:23-25)*, *a table of recognition (11:26)*, and *a table of invitation (11:27ff)*. We are invited to *examination (11:27-30)*, *rededication (11:31-32)*, and *communion (11:33)*.

5. **Service** *(1 Cor.15:10; 1 Pet.4:10-11)*—By employing *the gifts* that Christ has given us, we exercise stewardship of the manifold grace of God. *The gravity* of using such speaking or serving gifts is that they only operate properly by the strength that God supplies. In other words, gifts are not so much about abilities, but about being spiritual *(1 Cor.12:1ff)*. *The goal* of such service is that *"in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.4:11)*. Donald Whitney reminds us, "Service must become a spiritual discipline. The flesh connives against its hiddenness and sameness. Two of the deadliest sins—sloth and pride—loathe serving…. If we don't discipline ourselves to serve for the sake of Christ and His kingdom, we'll 'serve' only occasionally or when it's convenient or *self*-serving. The result will be a quantity and quality of service we'll regret when the Day of Accountability for our service comes."[2]

[2] Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991), 117.

6. **Encouragement** *(Heb.3:12-13)*—The writer urges us to listen to the advice, correction, and encouragement from others in the community of faith as one of *the God-ordained means to unmask the deception of sin*! One moment of sin, one hour of drifting, or one day of indulgence can result in months of wandering, years of backsliding, and even an eternity of misery. Encouragement is the pouring of concrete into the backbone of the believer so that they can stand firm. The means of encouragement is the Scriptures and the well-chosen and timed words that edify *(Rom.15:4; Prov.15:23; 25:11)*.

7. **Suffering** *(2 Cor.12:9ff; Acts 9:1ff; Phil.1:29-30; James 1:1-5)*—The backdrop of 2 Corinthians places us in the setting of spiritual warfare. False apostles have entered the church preaching a different Gospel and a different Jesus *(11:4)*. They claim to be true workers, but they are deceitful workers and agents of Satan masquerading as servants of Christ *(11:13-15)*. They attacked Paul's motives as a way of undermining his ministry. To define his calling and the church, the Apostle is forced to do something he is very uncomfortable doing, and that is, boasting about something other than Christ *(Gal.6:14)*. He calls himself a fool for doing so, but he must, so that the Corinthians can see the difference between their boasting and his. His boasting was not to promote himself, but to reveal the power of Christ in Him *(11:30)*.

   Instead of boasting about his strengths, Paul boasted in the things that exposed his weakness and exalted Christ. He begins by explaining *the revelation of glory (12:1-6)*, *the intervention of God (12:7-9)*, and then *the transformation of grace (12:10)*. The bottom line is that the way enabling power is experienced for the believer is not always by substitution, but it is often by transformation in the trial. Difficulties are a means of grace for the true Christian. Samuel Wilkes once said, "A Christian never falls to sleep in the fire or in the water but grows drowsy in the sunshine."

8. **Remembering** *(Deut.8:11-20; Heb.10:32; 13:3, 7)*—The word *"remember"* here doesn't mean to just recall something to mind, but rather to keep it in your mind where it can function as a conscious motive. It is used in the Bible in many ways. Solomon used it to enlighten us about the need to redeem the time when he said in Ecclesiastes 12:1, *"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth."* Jesus used this word to teach the disciples about the certainty of His Second Coming and the judgment to follow, when He said, *"Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32)*. In His farewell address to the elders at Ephesus, Paul admonished them, *"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' (Acts 20:35)*. Listen to Peter's words, *"I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder" (2 Pet1:13)*.

APPLICATION:

- What are you taking away from this study on the means of grace?
- What stood out to you and why?
- What corrected your thinking?
- What changes will you make to implement the light you've received?
- How can we pray for one another?

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