

“GRACE: CONNECT THE DOTS (#4): THE MEANS OF GRACE”

(Acts 2:41-47)

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[PROP NEEDED: “Grandpa Pooh” stuffed animal on top of stool in preaching]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-22-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read NRSV Text: Acts 2:41-47 and Pray.
2. This month we’ve been sharing in a Lenten sermon series in which we’re focusing on the grace of God – “*Connecting The Dots*” (so to speak) to help us better understand WHAT grace is, WHY we need it, and HOW its various forms/manifestations function in our lives.

A–And I’ve been using “Grandpa Pooh” here to illustrate what the Bible teaches about this:

1–Which is... that all of us are created in the image of God [**Hug Pooh**], but that Sin breaks that image and causes a separation/a gap [**Demonstrate...**] between who *we are* and who we were *created* to be.

2–But we’ve learned that “Prevenient Grace” is God’s initiative of love to each of us to overcome that gap and call us back home to life with Him [**Demonstrate...**]...

3–...And that “Justifying Grace” (more popularly called “*conversion, accepting Christ, being born again, or saved,*” etc.), is nothing more than God’s grace enabling us to turn [**Demonstrate...**] and take the *first step back* towards a right relationship with our heavenly Father.<sup>1</sup>

4–And last week we learned that “Sanctifying Grace” is God enabling us to take the *rest* of those steps back [**Demonstrate...**] by becoming more and more like Jesus for the rest of our lives.

B–Today, I want to both *talk about* and *experience* a few specific ways we can do this.

3. Now, these “ways” are sometimes called “*spiritual disciplines / spiritual tools*”– John Wesley and the early Methodists called them “**MEANS OF GRACE.**”

A–But by whatever term, it merely refers to specific vehicles that convey God’s grace from Him to us; and both Wesley and the authors of the Bible believed that our regular use of them was absolutely essential to our growth and maturing as Christians.

B–Think of the “means of grace” as exercise equipment: ...they don’t have any intrinsic value in themselves just sitting there; but when we exercise our faith *using* them, they help build spiritual muscle, which in turn enables us to grow in “Sanctifying Grace.”

C–Now hopefully none of these will be new to any of us, and we only have time to talk about a few, but these few are extremely important because they were given to us by Jesus himself, and therefore are meant to be used by *all* Christians in all times, places and cultures, regardless of our age, belief, or practice of faith. <sup>2</sup>

*(And you'll find information about all of them in your bulletin sermon notes)*

–II–

4. The first and by far most important “Means of Grace” is **PRAYER**, because God created it to be the primary means of communication between us and Him.

A–John Wesley once said that “*Prayer is the grand means of drawing near to God; and all other means] are helpful to us only so far as they are mixed with or prepare us for this.*” <sup>3</sup>

1–In Verse 42 of today’s scripture, we find that the disciples (MSG & NRSV) “*committed / devoted themselves to... the prayers.*”

2–In other words, they knew that just as our *human* relationships require mutuality and interaction in order to stay vibrant & alive, so does our relationship with *God*.

3–And that’s what prayer *IS* – an interaction / a *dialogue* (not a monologue) between our souls and God in which both we *and* God both talk *and* listen.

B–Prayer has been called the “*breath of our spiritual life*” – and just as our *physical* bodies can’t do without breathing, so our *spiritual* bodies can't do without prayer. <sup>4</sup>

1–You know, the times in my own life when I can recall feeling the farthest from God are usually the times I’ve also neglected my prayer life. <sup>5</sup>

2–Think about it: if you have someone whose relationship you love and treasure, don't you want to spend time with them?

3–Well, prayer is simply spending time with God – in the words of the medieval monk Brother Lawrence, it’s “*practicing the presence of God*” in our lives. <sup>6</sup>

C–So, what’s your prayer life like? Do you set aside intentional time to pray and be with God? ...to pray for people *besides* yourself? ...time to just meditate and *listen* to God? <sup>7</sup>

D–Before we move on, I want us to experience this “means” in a special way:

1–If you have recently lost or been downsized in your job, please raise your hand...

2–Those around, I would ask that you take their other hand, or put your hand on their shoulder, and take just 30 seconds to pray for them silently... and then I’ll pray

3–[**After 30 seconds of silent prayer, I PRAY...**]

5. Another “means of grace” given to us by Jesus is **SCRIPTURE READING**, which includes things like Bible study, devotional time, & hearing the preached or sung Word of God.

A–Verses 42 of today’s scripture also says that the disciples...(MSG) “*committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles*”; (NRSV) “*devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.*”

B–Now, what *were* these “teachings”? Well, they were the Holy Scriptures (what we today call the Bible), read and discussed and interpreted so believers could know how to *apply* them in their daily lives..

C–You see, that’s why reading, studying, and learning the Bible is important... because it gives us principles of advice and counsel and challenge about how we can apply our faith in everyday situations. <sup>8</sup>

D–And that’s why groups like “Disciple” Bible Study, and devotional tools like The Upper Room are so important – they give form, structure, and discipline to our “good intentions” about reading and studying the Bible.

E–So, what do YOU do to read and study the scriptures on a regular basis?

6. A third “means” modeled by Jesus and the early Christians is **CHRISTIAN WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP and ACCOUNTABILITY** <sup>9</sup>

A–A close look at history reveals that one of the primary reasons for the growth and vitality of Christianity was because believers gathered together regularly for these purposes.

1–Think about it: Jesus himself assembled a group of 12 disciples...

2–...And Verses 42 and 46 of today’s scripture says that these same disciples (MSG) “*Committed themselves to... life together... [and] followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple*”; (NRSV) “*Devoted themselves to... fellowship,... [and] spent much time together in the Temple....*” <sup>10</sup>

B–Obviously, the early Christians knew (as we need to know today), that if we want to grow in our faith, then we need to come together *regularly* to worship, share concerns of life, and experience loving support and accountability.

1–That’s why you hear me stress so much the importance of regular participation in worship and a small group for every single church member and friend.

2–And if you need help finding a group to belong to, the bulletin sermon notes can tell you how our staff can help you find your place.

7. Now, besides these, there are many other “means of grace” practiced both in the Bible and in Christian history.

A–Some of them are meant for *all* times and places (like “Fasting”<sup>11</sup>),...

B–...While others God seems to use & bless only during *certain* times & places in history<sup>12</sup> like particular *styles* of worship, *types* of music, or specific *forms* of discipleship/evangelism such as Camp Meetings, spiritual crusades, Walk to Emmaus, etc.).<sup>13</sup>

8. But due to time, I only want to talk about one more “means” that was specifically given by Jesus himself: **HOLY COMMUNION** – sometimes called “**The Lord’s Supper**” or “**Eucharist.**”

A–In addition to the other “means of grace,” today’s scripture also says that the disciples (MSG) “*committed themselves to the common meal... [and to] worship in the Temple, followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful*” (NRSV) “*devoted themselves to... the breaking of bread,... [and that] day by day... they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts*” (Verses 42 and 46).

B–Now remember in these early days, there were no church buildings in which to worship, so the Lord’s Supper took place around the dinner table in people’s *homes*, and it was a regular part of their personal spiritual growth.

C–And so even today, when we receive the bread and juice that symbolize the body & blood of Jesus, it’s an opportunity for us to honor Jesus’ *PAST* sacrifice for us on the cross, his presence with us in the *PRESENT* through the Holy Spirit, and to join the host of heaven (the “*communion of saints*”) in expectation of God’s grand party of the *FUTURE*.

–III–

9. Now, we’re going to experience this final “means” in just a moment, but the bottom line for today is that our growth and maturing as Christians doesn’t “just happen” on its own.

A–No, it takes our intentional, regular use of various “Means of Grace” which God Himself has given as specific ways to grow in our faith and become more and more like Jesus.

B–These “means” don’t *earn* us salvation, but like exercise equipment, they’re tools we can use to help experience the *fullness* and *heights* of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

C–So, how are YOU using God’s “Means of Grace” to grow in *your* spiritual life?

10. [PRAY]

11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

12. [CLOSING SONG: (Traditional) UMH#402, “Lord, I Want to Be A Christian”]

## ENDNOTES:

1. In this sense, “Prevenient Grace” deals with God’s OFFER of a renewed relationship with Him through love that leads us to repentance, “Justifying Grace” deals with our ACCEPTANCE of that offer through conversion (consisting of God’s forgiveness and our being “born again,” and “Sanctifying Grace” deals with how we LIVE INTO / CLAIM the completeness of that acceptance over the course of the rest of our lives.
2. The early Methodists referred to these kind as “INSTITUTED” means of grace because they were “instituted” (or given to us) by Jesus himself, either *explicitly* by his words or commands, or *implicitly* by his actions and deeds with his disciples.
3. Wesley, quoted in Colin Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 132.
4. Wesley, Note on I Thessalonians 5:16-17, quoted in Williams, p. 134.
5. John Wesley used to say that the lack of prayer was the common cause of something that he called “the wilderness state” of Christianity -- a sense of spiritual dryness/purposelessness that most Christians face at one time or another in their life.
6. Brother Lawrence was a 17<sup>th</sup>-century French contemplative monk (1611-1691), who is best known for his book The Practice of the Presence of God.
7. A mature Christian will practice a *balance* of various types and forms of prayer: public prayer (praying out loud); private prayer (personal devotional praying); family prayer (praying with your family members); written prayer (using previously prayers of others to guide and direct prayer time and avoid “wandering thoughts”); and extemporaneous prayer (praying “off the top of your head” to keep faith fresh and alive. In fact, Verse 42's reference to “the prayers” seems to indicate that in addition to their own extemporaneous prayers, the disciples practiced praying the written prayers of tradition.
8. A few helpful guidelines from John Wesley when we read and study the scriptures are:
  - (a) Know the whole Bible as much as possible (don’t just study parts you like).
  - (b) Have regular/disciplined daily readings (don’t just read it “when you feel like it”).
  - (c) Use Bible helps (such as commentaries) whenever possible (these can help the Holy Spirit give you insights you wouldn’t think about by yourself).
  - (d) Apply what you read to your daily life (Ask: “How can this apply to me today?”)
  - (e) When appropriate, share insights with others.
9. Called “*Christian Conferencing*” in the early Methodist tradition.
10. Read also Hebrews 10:25, which tells us, “*Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another.*”
11. For example, Christian **FASTING**. Not only did Jesus and the early Christians practice it, but they urged all people of faith to do the same (Read Matthew 6:16-18; Matthew 17:21; Luke 2:37; Acts 13:2-3; and Acts 14:23). Its purpose is *not* simply to “give up something,” but to draw us away from *earthly* things so that we might focus more on *spiritual* things (we know this because scriptural examples of fasting are nearly always coupled with prayer). And when we mix fasting with prayer and bible study, the results can greatly deepen and enrich our personal spiritual life and walk with God. In practice, fasting doesn’t involve starving oneself to death or anything that is dangerous to one’s health, but is simply a tool/method by which we can draw closer to God. It doesn’t have to involve long, drawn out fasts, but can instead include simply fasting from *after* supper one night until lunch-time the next day. As a practical matter, when one chooses to fast for longer periods, remember to drink plenty of liquids.

12. In contrast to the “Instituted” means of grace (which were meant for all times, all places and culture), John Wesley and the early Methodists called these “PRUDENTIAL” means of grace because they have seemed “prudent” for *specific* times, places, and cultures as ways that certain people or groups experience or have experienced God’s grace over the past 2000 years of Christian history. They are “means” that God seems to use and bless in *one* generation, or in *one* culture which may *not* have the same spiritually powerful effect in another generation or culture.

13. One example of a “Prudential” means of grace is **CHRISTIAN WORSHIP MUSIC**, which has taken on many forms in church history. For instance, in the first 1300 or so years of Christianity, worship music took the form of *a capella* chanting, and its graceful style and form touched many lives (Protestant churches like Methodism don’t use chanting much anymore in worship today, but several hymns in our United Methodist hymnal still reflect the stirring power of the chant, such as, #184 “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and #211 “O Come O Come Emmanuel”).

In the 1600-1700s, however, a few songwriters began doing a radical thing: they took many of the “bar tunes” of their day and added Christian lyrics to them – the result was a new style of worship music called the “*hymn*,” which we are still touched by today (favorite hymns today still include “Amazing Grace” (UMH#378), “How Great Thou Art” (UMH#77), and “In the Garden” (UMH#314)). Today, however, we are in the midst of yet another music revolution, where “*Praise Songs*” (like “Majesty”) and “*Seeker Songs*” (like “Shout to the Lord”) are touching and transforming lives in way that hymns no longer do. The point here is that Favorite hymns today still include “Amazing Grace” (UMH#378), “How Great Thou Art” (UMH#77), and “In the Garden” (UMH#314).

You see, the point is that while music styles change, the common theme of lifting up Jesus through them does not. Therefore, even if a particular style of music is not *our* style, we dare not ridicule it because it is an important (if not vital) way that some other people experience the very presence and grace of God in their life.

Other “Prudential” means of grace that God seems to be using today to help people find and grow in His grace are things like: **Christian retreats** such as “Walk to Emmaus,” “Cursillo,” and “Chrysalis”; **Christian classes** such as “Disciple” Bible Study, “Experiencing God,” and the various Beth Moore Series studies; **Lay-caring ministries** such as “Stephen Ministry” and “Shepherding”; **Worship renewal**, both in “contemporary” styles and the renewal of more “traditional” styles, too; and a renewed emphasis upon **accountability and spiritual formation** in our churches, not just for the pastor but for members as well.

14. In other words, in no way do our prayers or church attendance or the vast number of Bible verses we’ve memorized earn us brownie points with God. But our *regular and consistent use* of these tools will open us to God’s presence in such a way that makes possible our growth in personal salvation. Neither are the means “magic” tools – that is, we’re not *guaranteed* to have some great spiritual experience every time we use any specific one. But the more we use them, the more likely it will be that the Holy Spirit will “show up” and we’ll have such an experience.