

EXPERIENCING GOD'S PROMISED GRACE

David VanAcker, Pastor of Discipleship
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INTRODUCTION

Let's have a quick review. A healthy body of Christ submits to Christ as its head, recognizes that it is one body with many members, functions with individual members using their individual gifts for the common good, experiences God's promised grace, enjoys true fellowship, and results in an outward focus.

This definition of health flows from the conviction that Paul's use of the phrase *body of Christ*, always has in mind the nature and implications of two relationships: 1) the relationship between Jesus and Christians; and 2) the relationship among Christians and the fact that both are a gift from God through the Spirit.

So far we've covered the first three aspects of Paul's understanding of the body of Christ: the headship of Christ, the fact that Christians collectively make up the one body of Christ, and that God grants and empowers us to function in a particular way with particular gifts for the good of the church and the advancement of the gospel.

This morning we're going to talk about the different means of grace that God has assigned to the Church. Grudem defines "means of grace" in the following way: "*The means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to Christians.*"

In other words, God has chosen certain ways to bless (or give grace) to his people. Again, this morning we're going to look specifically at the ways that God has promised to bless Christians through the church or in the context of the church.

This is an especially important session for us for at least two reasons:

1. It's important because it's strikingly common for people to come to me and confess a feeling of distance from God with no real idea of what to do about it. Indeed, we've all had times where we've felt far from God. Even the biblical writers expressed discouragement and sadness because they perceived God to be far away. However, God has told us in his Word many of the places that he'll be. These places are called means of grace. And we should go there first when we long to be with God.

This session is especially important for those of us who'd like to experience greater or more frequent communion with God.

2. Secondly, this is important because many of these means of grace are also tied to commands. This means that God intends to bless us through them, but also that he expects them of us. To not take part in them is to sin against God. It's easy to see the overlap in these two reasons. Typically we feel most distant from God when we're engaged in sin.

THE MEANS OF GRACE IN THE CHURCH

So what are these means of grace in the church; or, where has God told us he'll be? Again, we'll lean heavily on Grudem for this one.

Historically, the preaching of the Word of God and the sacraments (baptism and communion) have been thought of as the only means of grace. However, Grudem believes that we should have a much broader understanding (he does not believe that this is an exhaustive list, but one that does covers most of the means of grace available to believers within the church).

1. **Teaching** of the **Word**. Even before people become Christians the Word of God is the means of grace by which He brings salvation to the lost (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:24; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Timothy 3:15). However, we also find in Scripture that the Word of God is a means of grace for Christians

as well; able to build us up (Acts 20:32), gives us life (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 32:47), convicts us of sin and draws our attention to righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16), guides us (Psalm 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19), makes us wise (Psalm 19:7), and gives us hope (Romans 15:4).

Indeed, God's Word is powerful and active, not weak and passive (Isaiah 55:10-11; Jeremiah 23:29; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). For these reasons Grudem suggests that the clear biblical teaching is that the Word of God is the *primary* means of grace for the church!

Since God has gifted certain people as teachers and assigned many of them to pastor/elder churches, the preaching and teaching of God's Word is a means of grace that God provides primarily through the church for the church.

This elevates the importance of Sunday morning and other times of public teaching; not only in our attendance (in Sunday School and the worship service and such) but also in our participation (reading the sermon text before, talking and praying with our families before, reading the Berea text before, etc.).

Again, putting ourselves under the teaching of God's Word is a primary means of grace for the church.

2. The **Lord's Supper**. Scripture teaches that the Lord's Supper is a means of assuring us of our salvation (1 Corinthians 10:16) and bringing unity to the church (1 Corinthians 10:17-21). Also, the NT picture of Communion is such that through it we are brought into a special fellowship with Jesus (John 6:33-58).

The Lord's Supper is meant to give us a visual reminder of the most significant event in human history. It's meant to remind us of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God saved us through the death of his Son. The Lord's Supper keeps this picture continually in front of us.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

3. **Baptism**. Baptism (a public act of confessing Jesus as Savior and a sign of the believers death and resurrection with Christ [Romans 6:2-5; Colossians 2:12]) is a commanded act (Matthew 28:19). Like all commanded acts of God we should expect there to be a measure of blessing for obedience to that act. Further, under the NT model (of being baptized immediately following conversion) we see that the gift of the Holy Spirit is given in connection with baptism (Acts 2:38).

I've been continually surprised by the lack of a strong view of baptism by nearly every doctrinally sound Christian that I've met. By the way that people talk and act toward baptism I'd assume that it was optional or, at the very least, a relatively insignificant practice for Christians.

This isn't how God's Word describes baptism however. Like the Lord's Supper the imagery of baptism points us to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and baptism reminds us of our benefits from it.

Romans 6:3-5 *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

God means for his people to be blessed, taught, and challenged through the practice of baptism.

4. **Prayer for one another.** We'll discuss prayer more in the next session, but here it is good to note that God has given us a command to and a pattern of praying for one another (Acts 4:24-31; 12:5; Hebrews 4:16).

In a mysterious way God is pleased to work through prayer. God works both in the one praying and in the one prayed for. What a gift it is to see God work as we continually call out to him on behalf of others. What a wonderful means of grace it is to pray for the healing of, provision for, restoration of, or soul of another Christian and witness God's work in it.

Acts 4:24-31 *And when they heard it [that a man was healed at the hands of the apostles], they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? ²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'- ²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

5. **Worship.** Again, there is a pattern in scripture of God bestowing special grace upon His people when they engage in genuine worship. Specifically, He spoke to them regarding a particular plan that He had for Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2), He revealed Himself in remarkable ways (2 Chronicles 5:13-14; James 4:8), He delivered His people (2 Chronicles 20:18-23), and revealed insight to His people (Psalm 73:17).

Acts 13:2-3 *While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

On a practical level, isn't it plain that when we truly go to God in worship he meets with us in a unique way? He blesses us and strengthens us and makes plain our sin and pettiness. What a means of grace worship has been for me throughout my Christian life.

6. **Church discipline.** Because church discipline is a means by which the purity of the church is advanced and holiness of life is encouraged, we certainly should count it as a means of grace as well. This is not to say that all people are given grace equally when church discipline is practiced. The one who is disciplined is not blessed unless he or she repents (2 Corinthians 7:10). And we should not expect spiritual blessing to those members of the church who come to hear of the discipline unless the Holy Spirit is active in their lives. This is why the promise of God to be present during this process (1 Corinthians 4:19-20; 5:5) and to sanction this process (Matthew 16:19; 18:18-20) are so precious.

When we sin against God and man without repentance we break fellowship with God and man. God has instituted church discipline as a means of teaching the seriousness of unreconciled sin and as a means of dealing with it. God gives us this process as a means of gracious restoration.

7. **Giving.** We see giving as a regular part of the lives of believers throughout the OT and the NT. We also see wrong giving as a regular part of the lives of believers throughout the Bible (Acts 8:20). Done by faith, however, giving of our finances is a remarkable means of grace (2 Corinthians 8:5; 9:6-12). Through giving God blesses the recipient (in that his or her needs are met) and the giver (because God loves and rewards a cheerful giver).

What a picture we have of this in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5, "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, ² for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. ³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own free will, ⁴

begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints- ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.”

What a means of grace it is to be able to contribute to the work of God going forth in such a simple way as giving what isn't ours!!!

8. **Spiritual gifts.** Again, we've covered this to a significant degree already, but note that 1 Peter 4:10 makes explicit that God intends spiritual gifts to be a means of grace for the church (as does 1 Corinthians 14:12 and Ephesians 4:11-16).

1 Peter 4:10-11 *As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies- in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

9. **Fellowship.** This, we'll cover in great detail in the next session. But don't miss the fact that biblical fellowship was a part of the early church (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24-25) and led to the blessing of God when done in love and obedience (John 15:12; Galatians 6:2).

10. **Evangelism.** Grudem notes that (in Acts in particular) there is often a significant connection between proclaiming the gospel and being filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 14-36; 4:8; 31; 9:17, 20; 13:9, 52). Evangelism is not only a means of grace then in that it ministers to the unsaved, but also because those who evangelize experience more of the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives.

Aside from his Word and worship, engaging in evangelism has been the most significant means of grace in my Christian life. There is something so simple and decisive and right about it that God's presence is easy to feel during it. It's a clear and obvious choice. Done rightly, the gospel is spoken clearly and joyfully. And, Lord willing, the sinner is saved as the believer held his hand and God's.

11. **Personal ministry** to individuals. God uses individuals in the church ministering to others in the church as a means of grace. This can take the form of helpful words (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 4:29), correcting a brother who is in sin (James 5:20), giving to assist the material needs of someone in the church (James 2:16; 1 John 3:17; Acts 4:34; Galatians 2:10), anointing the sick with oil (Mark 6:13; James 5:14); the laying on of hands for the purpose of healing (Luke 4:40; Matthew 8:3; 9:18; Mark 1:41; 5:23; 6:5; 8:23-25; Luke 5:13; 13:13), sending (Acts 6:6; 13:3), and imparting spiritual gifts (Acts 19:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6).

Anyone who has sat down with a more mature brother and sister in Christ on a regular basis for the purpose of being ministered to knows what a powerful means of grace personal ministry is.

CONCLUSION

Again, the idea is that God has provided for his people and through his people certain means of grace. We talked of 11 of them that are taught in Scripture. We would be wise to place ourselves in position to experience God's grace through all of them as often as possible. God means for us to drink from them and be satisfied in his good provision and presence.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Before this lesson, did you think that it made very much difference if a Christian continued to be active in the fellowship of the church or not? How has this session changed our perspective on that question, if at all?
2. Which of the means of grace mentioned in this session has been most helpful to you in your Christian life?
3. Which of the means of grace mentioned in this session do you think you appreciated least? How has your appreciation for that means of grace increased? How do you think this will affect your actions from now on?

4. As you look over the list of means of grace, are there some areas in which people are not actually experiencing “grace” or blessing in your own church? What could be done to increase the effectiveness of these weak areas as means of grace in the life of your church?
5. Which of the means of grace are actually least helpful in your life? Are there some that have become rather mechanical, and that you are performing only as an outward or physical activity, without any real participation in your heart? What could you do to increase the effectiveness of those means in your life?
6. As you look over the list of the means of grace again, name one or more in which you could begin to help the church be more effective in bringing blessing to its people?