

22 February 2015

## Means of Grace

Matthew 22:34-40

This is the season of Lent, a time of preparation and discipline. Is everyone excited? Well, just in case the word *discipline* is not a happy word for all of you, let me explain what we usually mean by the word. Lent is when you think of something that you really, really enjoy and then *stop it!* For forty days. Better? I didn't think so. But isn't that how Lent is thought of? As a grim and joyless season of denial for the sake of denial? Is there, maybe, a better way to approach Lent?

Because I'd really like to. The idea of setting aside forty days to focus intentionally on our own spiritual growth and health is a *good* idea. I just don't want to do it the way it's usually done. For starters, if we treat growing in faith as being about giving up things that we enjoy, that means that the more we grow spiritually, the less joy we have. That's not been my observation. People with strong faith, in my experience, actually laugh more. They have more reason to. Christianity, at heart, is not really about what we give up or what we don't do. The true marks of faith are more about what we do that others don't. So this Lenten season I don't want to talk about disciplines or about what we give up because we're followers of Christ. Instead I want to talk about the actions, behaviors, and habits that John Wesley called, "means of grace."

See, that feels more positive, doesn't it? But I need to take a moment to unpack that phrase, too. Grace is the forgiveness and love that God gives us freely, just because God loves us, so how can any things that we do be "means" of grace? That almost sounds as if there are things we can do to earn, like, extra portions of grace. That's *not* what I mean, nor what Wesley meant. Instead, Wesley defines these actions not as tools by which we *earn* grace but rather the "ordinary channels" by which we encounter the grace that has already been given.

Let me illustrate. Among the "means of grace" that Wesley talked about are: prayer, study of scripture, frequent Communion, "holy conferencing," fasting, serving others. We could name more – and over the next few weeks we will – but that's enough for today. Now, some of you are thinking, what's the difference between that list and a list of "spiritual disciplines"? And you're right: the lists have basically the same items on them. But there *is* a difference. The difference, again, is the way we approach these things. A "spiritual discipline" is something we do to ourselves, to whip ourselves into shape. A "means of grace" is something we do looking beyond ourselves, seeking something we need. If you're turning your back on something, it's a discipline; if you're turning *towards* something, it's a means of grace. Take attending church, for instance. If you come to church only as a discipline, grudgingly giving up your Sunday morning so as to be marked present in St. Peter's heavenly attendance book, you might as well have stayed home. But if you come to worship because here you have encountered God in the past and here you hope to again, then it is a means of grace. Or again, reading scripture is good, and establishing a regular time for doing so is an excellent practice. But if that reading time becomes a rigid and legalistic routine and you manage to communicate to your wife Rebecca and three kids that you'd like them to tiptoe around while you're doing your Bible reading, because, "Hey! I'm being spiritual in here!" then you're doing it as a discipline and doing it wrong. I myself have known people like that. If, however, you go to scripture with the expectation that, no matter how many times you've read it before, there is yet more light waiting to break forth from God's word – why then it is a means of grace.

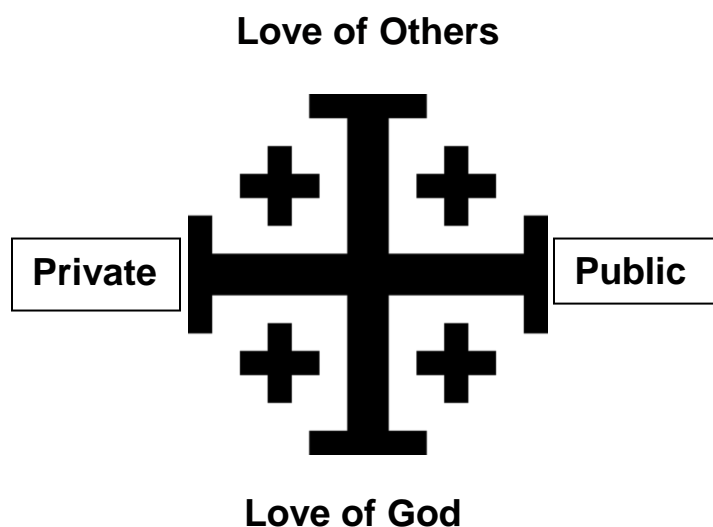
So this season I want us to think together about, and challenge each other to practice, these "means of grace." We'll talk about the ones that Wesley mentioned. I'll add some others that have been meaningful to me. And you'll have a chance to share with each other things that have been "means of grace" for you. I want us to think about the practices that bring us into the awareness of God's gracious presence. But, you ask, what sorts of things? How do we know if something counts as a "means of grace"? Aren't there some guidelines? Yes, there are. And that leads us to our scripture today.

Matthew 22:34-40. *When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

So a specialist in the Jewish law came to Jesus with what was evidently meant as a trap. “Master, what would you say is the greatest of all the commandments?” To the scribe’s surprise, Jesus ignored the Ten Commandments and turned to Deuteronomy 6. *You shall love the Lord your God with all you have and all you are.* Then, for good measure, he tossed in the second greatest of the laws, this one from Leviticus 19: *Love your neighbor as you love yourself.* Finally, he added, *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*

Those are the guidelines by which we determine whether something is a “means of grace.” Does it express love for God? Does it express love for others? If it does either, it is. If it doesn’t, it isn’t. That’s how we’re going to look at the means of grace this Lenten season: first, love for God, and then love for neighbor. For the sake of clarity, we’re also going to distinguish between those things that we do on our own, privately, and those we do together, publically, but the important distinction is in Jesus’ simple words to the scribe in our passage: love God and love others. That’s it. On these two commandments hang every genuine act of faith, every true search for meaning, every authentic means of grace.

I hope this Lenten series sounds a little more interesting now than just another discussion of discipline and self-denial. Instead of a time of testing, let it be a time of refreshment, of discovery, an intentional time of seeking out and experiencing the grace that God offers always. Set this season aside. It’s sort of like going out of town for vacation. Do you have to leave town and go somewhere special on your vacation? No, you can stay right in your own home. But the chances are, if you take your vacation at home, you’ll end up mostly watching TV and cooking and doing housework. It helps to get away – to do something different. And so long as we’re getting away, there are certain places we can go that are better choices than others. That’s why, if we can, we go on cruises or go camping in Yosemite or hiking in New Zealand or beachcombing in the Gulf – and not to a Holiday Inn in Janesville. Some vacation destination just work better. In the same way, while God’s continuing grace can be experienced all the time, everywhere, including at work or school, it *helps* to step outside the daily routines and do some things just for the sake of seeking God’s grace. And so long as we’re doing that, there are a few things that we can do that thousands of years of church experience have proven more likely to be effective than others: these are the “means of grace.”



**Final Word:** I’m starting to get tired of Pope Francis. I got to church this morning with this sermon all prepared and practiced and turned on the computer to read his Ash Wednesday sermon. To summarize his message: Let’s devote this Lent not just to acts of penance and self-denial but rather to acts that show love of God and love of others. In that sermon, he quoted St. John Chrysostom, an early church father, who said: “No act of virtue can be great if it is not followed by advantage for others. So, no matter how much time you spend fasting, no matter how much you sleep on a hard floor and eat ashes and sigh continually, if you do no good to others, you do nothing great.” Amen