



Last month I taught Children's Church for the first time. After laboring hard at preaching for sixteen years, they finally let me teach Children's Church. I consider it to be a promotion. And it was really a lot of fun! When we were first married, Karen and I directed the Children's Church program and taught it every single Sunday. But since it was my first time teaching it at Grace, I told the kids it was my first time teaching Children's Church. One girl stood and up and with all seriousness said to me, "Well if this is your first time, it better be good!" I hope I met her expectations.

We can only fit so many kids in that small room. I think I heard we had as many as twenty kids in Children's Church at one time. That's a lot of little ones at once. Imagine if you had about 300 4 year olds in this room and it was your first time teaching? Let's boost those numbers by ten-fold. What if you were outside with 3000 four year olds and you had to teach them a Bible lesson and you'd never taught before? If there were such a thing as a G-rated horror movie, that would be it, wouldn't it?

What I have just described is a page out of Pentecost after Peter was done preaching. You know the scene, right? The Lord Jesus ascended to Heaven but not before he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Ten days later, on the Jewish day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appeared on them like tongues of fire. They were speaking in tongues. They could hear foreigners speaking in their own languages. In the midst of this glorious chaos, Peter stood up among the crowds and preached his very first sermon. The Lord used that sermon to bring 3000 souls to saving faith in Christ.

Here's where we pick up on my Children's Church analogy. What do you do with 3000 four year olds if you have never taught before? What do you do with 3000 new believers if you never disciplined anyone before? What a job, right? There was great rejoicing in Jerusalem that day but you can only imagine the apostles saying to one another, "OK guys, now what do we do?" What they did next would lay the foundation for the church and for the spread of the gospel throughout

the world. Not only that, but what they did in that moment we are still doing to this day. Let's read about it in Acts chapter 2.

41 So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Pretty basic stuff, right? What they did is what the leaders in the Reformation call “means of grace.” What in the world is a “means of grace” you ask? A means of grace are often called “spiritual disciplines”. I am growing to appreciate the terms “means of grace” because it emphasizes the end result. What you are seeking is God's grace and these are the means to gain more of God's grace.

So what those first disciples did was the foundation of Christian discipleship. It was the right thing two thousand ago and it's the right thing today. Please take a look at the discipleship

MEANS OF GRACE

- Bible reading, meditation, teaching, memorization, preaching
- Prayer—ACTS
- Lord's Supper/Baptism
- Worship/Service/Rest



brochure again and turn to the inside. On the left side under “Abide,” you will see the list of “means of grace.” What these 3000 brand new believers did is very close to our list. It's not exactly the same. We expanded on a bit, but it's the same basic list.

The means of grace can be divided into two types of grace—justifying (saving) grace and sanctifying grace. The word of God alone is the means of saving grace. The rest of the things on our list are

means of sanctifying grace.

All by itself, God's word can bring salvation to an unbeliever. Whether it happens in a worship service, in a hotel with a Gideon Bible or in the bedroom of a Muslim teenager in Saudi Arabia, there is power in the Word of God to save. We see this power described in Romans 10.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ (Romans 10:14-17).

This is the power of God's word that Martin Luther rediscovered that gave birth to the Reformation. The Reformation was powerful because simply put, it gave the word of God back to the people in their own language and thereby released the Word to do its work of conversion and transformation. Listen to how Luther described the powerful impact of the Word.

I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.¹

God ordained that a few things come together for Luther. Luther rediscovered the true gospel message in the Word, he and others began to translate the Bible into common languages and the printing press had recently been invented so the Scriptures and teaching pamphlets could get into the hands of the common man. The Word had been held in prison by the Church for a thousand years. The power of the Word that was unleashed in the 16th century is still spreading throughout the globe to this day.

We understand the power and impact of the Word of God, but you may not yet grasp what we mean by calling it a means of grace. So let me offer some principles to help.

1. It's a means to a greater end, not the end itself.

All of these things that fit into the category of a means of grace must be understood this way. What is the end goal of reading, preaching, memorizing and meditating on the Scriptures? The goal, or the end to use that word, is not merely to read Scripture or memorize verses, right? The goal is for the unbeliever to be radically saved by God through the reading of his Word and understanding the gospel. And the goal for the believer is to be continually transformed by obeying His commands and believing the promises that God has given in His Word.

Salvation and transformation are the ultimate goal, the end for which we seek. But being engaged with the Scriptures is the means to the end. Do you see the difference? It's a pretty basic concept except that we often fail to realize that we are not following this pattern. We can make one of two basic errors. Our first mistake is that we avoid a regular diet of God's Word and think to ourselves, "I don't have to read the Bible to be a good Christian." Yes you do. We all do. You cannot grow deeper in Christ unless you are continually exposed to the words of Christ. It simply can't be done. So if you think that your Bible that gets dusty Monday through Saturday and you dutifully drag to church on Sunday is going to help you, you're wrong. I'm not saying you are going to go off the deep end and lose your faith, but your faith will stagnate without the Word.

2. A means of grace is not manipulating God in any way.

But the other mistake we make is to have this mindset that as long as we read the Bible often enough, it will help us. The classic example goes like this. You are struggling with your faith. Maybe you have some depression developing. Maybe you and your spouse are struggling in your marriage. So you go talk to your pastor and the typical first question that he asks is what? "How

often are you reading your Bible?” Now they might mean well but too often the assumption is that just reading your Bible will solve your problems. Read your Bible and pray more and your problems will melt away.

Do you see that this kind of advice views Bible reading as the end itself instead of a means to an end. It’s almost like Bible reading is magical in some way; that the mere act of reading it will bring you grace, and of course the more you read, the more grace you receive.

This kind of thinking is similar to the Roman Catholic idea of “*ex opera operato*” (by the work done). Take the eucharist, for example. Catholic doctrine teaches that if you receive the eucharist which was blessed by a priest, just by receiving it, you get God’s grace. It doesn’t matter what you do, as long as you get that holy wafer inside of you. The grace comes through the wafer. This is not that far from saying that by merely reading your Bible, you get grace.

When I first introduced this idea of a means of grace in a LEAD session, someone asked me if this is in any way related to the Catholic doctrine. That was a really good question, because it is easy to pick up on terms and not really understand them. For example, when I was writing my ordination paper in 1997, when writing about the virgin birth of Jesus, I used the term immaculate conception. I asked several people to review the paper for me and they pointed out that in Catholic doctrine, the immaculate conception refers to Mary’s immaculate conception. They believe that Mary also had a virgin birth, otherwise, she could not have been a pure vessel for Jesus’ virgin birth. I was like, “Whoops, I think I’ll rewrite that section!”

You know how much I appreciate our Bible quiz ministry. It is great for the youth in so many ways, chief among them, obviously, is that they are hiding the Word of God in their hearts. The quizzers especially enjoy the tournaments when they get to meet quizzers from others parts of the country. But there is one guy who teaches what I think is a wrong idea about Bible memorization. He believes that memorizing a few verses of Scripture is itself an act of worship. Therefore, the more verses you memorize, the more you are worshipping God. Can you see where this kind of thinking gets off track?

Of course it could be true that memorizing some verses leads you to worship God better. But to say that memorizing Scripture automatically makes you worship more or worship better is just completely wrong. That kind of belief is almost identical to the Catholic doctrine of *ex opera operato*; like memorizing Scripture all by itself makes you a better Christian. Now again, it might. And I’d much rather someone memorize Scripture than not memorize Scripture. But I have seen people memorize Scripture and not have it affect the very much. On occasion, a quizzer might memorize Scripture and become prideful at how many Bible verses they know. Memorizing Scripture all by itself does not automatically do anything for you any more than merely reading the Bible automatically makes you a better Christian. So what is the missing ingredient?

3. The receiving of grace depends on the heart of the participant.

You can do all of this stuff and not get any grace. Worse still, you can do all of this stuff and heap up guilt and sin by doing it for all the wrong reasons. For transformation to take place, your

heart needs to be engaged in the process. You can't just open the Bible and expect it to change you. It's not a book of magical incantations. There are no shortcuts.

Charles Finney was an 18th century evangelist but also a teacher of multiple false doctrines. But I do like one thing he said on this subject. He said we should seek for "devotion, not devotions." Some of you are very disciplined and you routinely have your devotions. But sometimes that's all we have. We have devotions but not much devotion to the Lord.



The latest craze is for women to Instagram their quiet times. They always have an open Bible and a cup of coffee. Like the old saying, if a tree falls in the woods and no one hears it, did it really happen? You could say, if a woman has a quiet time and doesn't Instagram it, did it really happen? Just poking a little fun here, because I'm usually drinking coffee when I'm reading my Bible too. But the place, the beverage and lots of things about entering into God's word don't matter if the heart is not in it.

Which is the reason we list all of the ways that you can engage with the Word. We have listed Bible reading, meditation, teaching, memorization and preaching. We need to be exposed to and interact with the Word as much as possible.

Let me say something about meditating on Scripture as I am guessing many do not understand what this looks like. To some, it could sound a little New-Agey, mantra, meditation sort of thing. Meditating on Scripture is simply thinking about a verse or a passage in depth. You roll it over in your mind. You make observations. You see things you had not seen before. You start to see how this verse relates to that verse. That's meditation.

Do you want to know what I think is the best avenue for meditating on Scripture? Memorizing Scripture. If you have verses, passages and maybe even books in your head, you can access them any time, anywhere. Let me read something Karen sent to me a couple weeks ago.

This week I've been contemplating Luke 1 and 2. Anyway, I'm really struck by the fact that both Mary and Elizabeth were called "blessed," when they were both going to be witnessing the murdering of their sons in their lifetime. Simeon told Mary that a sword would pierce through her own soul. It is making me rethink a bit what it may mean to be called 'blessed'. In our human, worldly terms, we tend to think that this means we will prosper, etc. But, could it mean that the 'blessed' life is the one that is used by God to bring others to him, to bring conviction to the world, to cause others to praise Him even if we need to suffer loss in order for that to happen?²

I'm obviously biased, but I think this is a great observation that Karen made. Look at her last sentence again. "But, could it mean that the 'blessed' life is the one that is used by God to bring others to him, to bring conviction to the world, to cause others to praise Him even if we need to suffer loss in order for that to happen?" It's so true. There's a whole sermon in that one sentence which is based on the lives of Mary and Elizabeth.

Now when Karen said she was contemplating, that is what I mean by meditating. And the reason this was rolling around in her mind is because she has Luke chapter 1 and 2 memorized. She wasn't even looking for this observation. By simply reviewing the chapters again that day, it just came to her. That is the power of memorizing Scripture. Memorizing the Word leads to this kind of meditation on the Word.

A similar thing happened to me on Friday as I was driving to Prairie du Chien to watch Ethan's basketball game. I have been memorizing the book of Ephesians to prepare to preach it after this discipleship series is done. As I was reviewing the chapters, I got stuck on a couple of them—that is, stuck in a really good way. One of the verses I got stuck on was Ephesians 2:7—*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

Now what comes right before this is a rehearsal of our utter sinfulness and a reminder of God's gracious salvation. By itself, verses 1-6 are well worth memorizing. But notice that verse seven has a purpose clause—so that. That's really important, because it means that Paul is about to give the reason why God saved us. Why did God make us alive, even though we were dead in our trespasses and sins? Why did Jesus die for us, even while we were his enemy? Aren't those great questions? Don't you want to know why he did this for us? Verse seven tells us—*so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

Let's break this down a bit. Paul says that Jesus was showing us his immeasurable grace. That hit me in the car—immeasurable grace. Yes, I said to myself, it is immeasurable. It is infinite. There is no end to his grace.

Also, the immeasurable riches of his grace is itself a form of kindness. We were hopelessly lost and completely dead and following the prince of the air and a child of wrath. We were all of those things, yet God showed us kindness. When we needed it the most, God was kind to us.

And he showed that kindness “toward us in Christ Jesus.” Any time you see the phrase “in Christ Jesus,” it is a statement of relationship and security. Being in Christ is the same as abiding in Christ. Remember, there are two types of abiding. There's the positional abiding—we abide by virtue of being saved. And then there's experiential abiding—we actively abide by walking in obedience to his commands. To be “in Christ” is the positional abiding. It is a statement of who we are. We are in Christ. Nothing can change our secure relationship with him.

Now remember, all of this was happening as I drove south on Hwy 27. All of this happens because I started memorizing this a year ago. All of this was hitting me at once. And I saved what might be the best part for last. Look at the first part of verse seven again. *so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace...* Did you catch that? Why did Jesus pour out his grace on us? Not only to show us his immeasurable grace, but to show us his immeasurable grace ***in the coming ages!*** Do you see what this means? It means that for all eternity we will be meditating on, rejoicing in and celebrating his grace, but it will never stop. We will never exhaust the knowledge and experience of God's immeasurable grace. And that

makes sense, doesn't it? If it is immeasurable, we'll never be able to measure it. In ten million years from now, we won't say, "Ya know, this whole cross and grace thing is getting old. Can't we talk about something else?" We'll never be able to say such a thing for all eternity.

So that's the glory of our eternity, but what about today and tomorrow? I hope you can see that if you are going to be enjoying the truth about Jesus for all eternity, how much more should we get started today.

Lord's Supper

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Corinthians 11:26).

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¹ <http://faculty.wts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/The-Word-as-a-Means-of-Grace.pdf>, p. 67-68.

² Karen Maurer, email dated 1/25/17.