



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 6 – THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
LESSON 99 – THE MEANS OF GRACE

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God Uses Means

- ▶ God accomplishes His stated (decreed) purposes by the use of means.
- ▶ God uses various means to bring blessing, strengthen faith, and cultivate spiritual growth in the lives of His people.
- ▶ Historically, these means have been called “the means of grace” and are the instruments through which God’s Spirit graciously grows believers in Christlikeness (2 Cor. 3:17-18).
- ▶ The means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to believers.

The Means of Grace

- ▶ The means of grace as typically listed to include the Word of God (preached, read, sung), and the Ordinances (The Lord's Supper and Baptism).
- ▶ The list, when rightly understood, may also include: prayer, worship, church discipline, giving, spiritual gifts, fellowship, and other ministries (evangelism, counseling, etc.).
- ▶ All of these are available to believers *within* the church. The Holy Spirit works through all of them to bring various kinds of blessing to individuals and the church corporately gathered.

Priests or People?

- ▶ The term “means of grace should not be confused with the term “sacraments” as used by the Roman Catholic Church.
- ▶ The RCC traditionally has believed that God’s grace comes to people only through the official ministry of the church, particularly through the priests to the church. Therefore, when it specifies the sacraments that are available to people within the church, it has in view activities that are supervised and/or performed by only the priests of the church.
- ▶ The Seven Sacraments of the RCC include: baptism, confirmation, eucharist (the Lord’s Supper experienced in the Mass), penance, extreme unction (the last rites given to a dying person), holy orders (ordination to the priesthood or diaconate), and matrimony.

Defining the Terms

- ▶ There is not only a difference in the lists given by Catholics and Protestants; there is also a difference in fundamental meaning. Catholics view these as “means of salvation” that make people more fit to receive justification from God. For the Protestant, the means of grace are simply means of additional blessing within the Christian life, and do not add to our fitness to receive justification from God.
- ▶ Protestants teach that God only imparts grace by these means when there is faith present in the recipient. Catholics teach that the means of grace impart grace whether there is subjective faith on the part of the minister or the recipient.
- ▶ The Catholic Church restricts the administration of the sacraments to clergy while Protestants include many activities that are carried out by all or any believers.

Fit for Justification

- ▶ Our justification (right standing before God) is based upon the declaration of God that we are legally pardoned of our sins and Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, meaning we are declared right in His sight.
- ▶ It is essential to the heart of the gospel to insist that God declares us to be righteous not based on our actual condition of being righteous or holy, but rather based on the imputed, perfect righteousness of Christ.
- ▶ Justification is that instantaneous act of God whereby, as a gift of His grace, He imputes to a believing sinner the full and perfect righteousness of Christ through faith alone and legally declares him perfectly righteous in His sight, forgiving the sinner of all unrighteousness and thus delivering him from all condemnation.
- ▶ This is not an impartation or infusion of righteousness.

Fit for Justification

- ▶ As an imputation, it describes what God declares about true believers and not what He does to change believers. Justification itself effects no change in the sinner's nature or character. It is a change of status before God and not a gradual transformation that takes place within us as we believe.
- ▶ In RCC teaching, justification does not mean “to declare righteous,” but “to make righteous.” They conflate justification and sanctification. The righteous things you do then become part of what saves you, so you are saved based on your righteousness added to Christ's righteousness.
- ▶ Therefore, the Catholic teaching that the means of grace make us more fit for justification speaks to the idea that the “instrumental cause of the first justification is the Sacrament of Baptism.” For justification to begin one must first be baptized and then as an adult continue in the Sacraments so that they might continue to have faith and as they continue to have faith they continue to be justified. The level of justification then depends upon the level of dogmatic observance of the Sacraments. (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, pg. 251).

Specific Means: God's Word

- ▶ God's Word is the primary means the Spirit of God uses to grow believers in sanctification.
- ▶ 1 Peter 2:1 Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.
- ▶ The relationship between the believer's sanctification and the Scriptures is underscored by the Lord Jesus in His High Priestly prayer, when speaking of believers, He prayed, "Sanctify them by truth; Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).
- ▶ Being filled with the Spirit can also be defined as letting "the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Eph. 5:18-6:9; Col. 3:16-4:1).

Specific Means: God's Word

- ▶ 2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
- ▶ All we require for life and godliness is given to us in the knowledge of Christ as revealed through God's Word (2 Peter 1:3).
- ▶ The Word is part of the means as we hear it preached, sing it, memorize and meditate upon it, read it, pray it, teach it, etc.
- ▶ 2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Specific Means: Baptism

- ▶ By both example and instruction, the Lord Jesus gave the church two ordinances that they are to observe: baptism (Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19) and the celebration of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19-20).
- ▶ The word baptize means to immerse or dip and when used literally can refer to dipping fabric into dye or the immersion of a person in water.
- ▶ All believers are "immersed" into Christ by the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion, meaning that they are baptized in the Spirit, or baptized into Christ by the Spirit.
- ▶ Water baptism portrays this inward reality through outward means. It is this public testimony and obedience to Christ's command that identifies us with Jesus.

Specific Means: Baptism

- ▶ The proper subjects of baptism are those who have heard the gospel and responded in repentance and faith, being converted to Christ, thus outwardly portraying the inward reality that they have experienced.
- ▶ All who are seen being baptized in the New Testament first heard the Word and then believed and were baptized.
- ▶ The proper mode is immersion of the person in water, as the word itself suggests.
- ▶ Baptism plays no part in the work of salvation, but rather is a symbol of the believer's union with Christ.

Specific Means: The Lord's Table

- ▶ A second ordinance that must be observed in the Lord's Table, or Communion. Unlike baptism, which occurs once following conversion, the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated repeatedly throughout the Christian life.
- ▶ In the upper room before His prayer and arrest in the garden, Jesus demonstrated the fulfillment of the Passover Feast in His own crucifixion and instituted the Lord's Supper as a means of His disciples celebrating that fulfillment and remembering His death on the cross as the spotless Lamb of God.
- ▶ The observance of this ordinance is an opportunity for examination, confession, and remembrance (1 Cor. 11:27-32).
- ▶ By partaking, we are preaching the gospel to ourselves and one another (1 Cor. 11:26).

Specific Means: The Lord's Table

- ▶ Both the bread and wine used in the observance of Communion are to be unleavened, not only in accordance with the Passover tradition, but because the absence of leaven in these elements directly testifies to the sinlessness of Christ. Yeast (leaven) most often represents sin in the Scriptures and for Christ to be the final Passover Lamb, who died once for all, He must be sinless.
- ▶ The preparation of the bread is completed without the addition of leaven, and the wine is naturally unleavened as the process of fermentation destroys the yeast and it is removed after the remaining debris rises to the top and is removed. (Pasteurization also kills the yeast in grape juice without producing alcohol as a by-product).

Specific Means: Prayer

- ▶ Prayer, both corporate and private is a vital means of grace that God uses to grow His people in holiness (Heb. 4:16).
- ▶ In 1 Thess. 5:17 we are instructed to “pray without ceasing.” This imperative designates the heart attitude that ought to characterize every congregation.
- ▶ The command “pray” includes all facets of prayer: dependence, adoration, confession, intercession, thanksgiving, and supplication. (Matt. 6:5-6; Mark 11:24; Luke 5:16; 11:1-2; Acts 10:9; Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 14:13-15; Eph. 6:18; Col. 1:9; 2 Thess. 3:1; James 5:13-14, 16).
- ▶ The perfect example of prayer for us is the Lord Jesus during His earthly incarnation (Matt. 14:23; 26:38-46; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 9:18, 28-29; 22:41, 44; John 6:15; 8:1-2; 17:1-26).

Specific Means: Worship

- ▶ Worship is the theme of salvation history, the supreme purpose for which believers were redeemed (John 4:23), and the occupation with which they will be eternally enthralled (Rev. 22:3-4).
- ▶ To worship the Lord is to ascribe to Him the honor, glory, adoration, praise, reverence, and devotion that is due to Him, both for His greatness and His goodness.
- ▶ As Sovereign Creator of the universe, the Triune God alone – Father, Son, and Spirit – is worthy of worship (Isa. 42:8; 48:11; Matt. 4:10; Rev. 14:7).
- ▶ The veneration or worship of angels, saints, or other supposed deities constitutes idolatry and is strictly prohibited by Scripture (Ex. 20:3-5; Col. 2:18; Rev. 19:10; 22:9).

Specific Means: Worship

- ▶ True worship must begin in the heart and mind of the worshipper; hence, it cannot be equated with elaborate services, ornate buildings, eloquent prayers, or beautiful music. Those things are outward expressions of genuine worship, but God accepts only that which flows from sincere devotion to Him.
- ▶ When gathered for corporate worship, the congregation worships God by praising through song, beseeching Him in prayer, and participating in the reading of the Word and hearing the Word preached.
- ▶ Giving of thanks, and tithes and offerings is also an expression of worship and is to be done cheerfully from the heart (2 Cor. 9:6-15).

Specific Means: Fellowship

- ▶ The partnership or sharing that we have together in the gospel is defined as “fellowship.”
- ▶ The practice of fellowship consists of sacrificial service to other members of the body of Christ (Phil. 2:1-4; Acts 4:32-37). Each member, like parts of the body, contribute to the life of the whole (1 Cor. 12:12-27).
- ▶ The unity, commonality, and togetherness ought to characterize the fellowship of every local church (Rom. 12:16).
- ▶ Expressions of fellowship include discipleship (Matt. 28:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:2), mutual accountability (Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 10:24-25), and joyful service (1 Cor. 15:58; Eph. 4:12; Rev. 22:12).
- ▶ The “one-another” commands of the NT further elaborate on how fellowship should be expressed within the congregation.

Specific Means: Church Discipline

- ▶ The practice of church discipline ought to be motivated by a positive, loving desire both to preserve the purity of the church and to restore sinning brothers and sisters to fellowship.
- ▶ Church discipline should never be motivated out of self-righteous pride, political agendas, a desire to exercise power, or with the intention of embarrassing people.
- ▶ It should ultimately be overseen by elders as they shepherd the flock, sincerely longing to see wandering sheep repent, return, and be restored.

Specific Means: Church Discipline

- ▶ If any member of the church (any Christian brother or sister who is part of the Body of Christ) sins against another believer or against the Church itself –
- ▶ 1. He is to obey the Lord and heed his conscience by repenting and being reconciled to God and to anyone else he has sinned against (1 John 1:9; Matthew 5:23-24; James 5:16).
- ▶ 2. If he does not repent, he is to be reprovved in private by the one against whom he has sinned (Matthew 18:15).
- ▶ 3. If he still does not repent, he is to be reprovved a second time with one or two witnesses who may confirm both his response and the spirit in which he has been rebuked (Matthew 18:16).
- ▶ 4. If he still does not repent, the matter is to be taken before the church (Matthew 18:17).
- ▶ 5. If he will not listen to the church, then the church is to remove him from membership (if he is a member of that local body) and from all fellowship (Matthew 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:12-13).

Specific Means: Church Discipline

- ▶ The goal in church discipline is restoration of a sinning believer to fellowship. The individuals and the churches must not act in the place of the Holy Spirit by demanding restoration but must humbly obey the Scriptures for the sake of proving their love for Christ (1 John 5:3) and their love for the one caught in sin (1 John 4:7-11; Matthew 22:39). The Spirit of God calls the sinner to repentance and grants it in the presence of godly sorrow (John 16:5-15; 2 Tim. 2:25-26).
- ▶ Those who are called on to rebuke a sinning believer are “to restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). If at any point including after removing him from fellowship and membership, he repents, then we are to restore him, “forgive and comfort him” (2 Cor. 2:7), and “reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:8). Church discipline is to be applied to all members of the Body of Christ without bias or partiality (1 Tim. 5:19-21; Gal. 2:11).

Conclusion

- ▶ The means of grace are any activities within the fellowship of the church that God uses to give more grace to believers.
- ▶ 2 Peter 3:17 You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.
- ▶ Next Week: Lesson 100 – Church Government