

In last week's sermon marking the beginning of the Lenten season, we discussed the essence of holiness in our Wesleyan tradition. We explored holiness not as adherence to rules, an unattainable goal, or a solitary endeavor but as a transformative process driven by God's grace, focusing on living out our faith through love and service.

The central claim I made through the Scriptures of 1 Thessalonians 4:3 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 was that sanctification is God's will for us, calling us to be ambassadors of God's love in the world, reflecting the character of Christ in our lives.

Today, as we transition to the next sermon in our series, "Grace upon Grace: The Means of Sanctification," we are looking into the means of grace and how they position us to receive God's grace.

But first, let me provide you with some historical context.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and after whom we use the term "Wesleyan" holiness, was profoundly influenced by his encounters with the Moravians, a group of German Christians known for their steadfast and deeply personal faith in God. Wesley admired their spiritual devotion but found himself at a crossroads regarding their practice of quietly waiting for God's action in their lives. Wesley believed in a more active engagement with God through what he identified as the means of grace—practices that not only awaited God's grace but actively sought it out.

Wesley's early experiences set him on a path of disciplined spiritual practices such as regular Scripture reading, daily prayer, participation in Holy Communion, and acts of service or mercy like visiting prisoners. These practices were not mere religious routines but vital means of grace—channels through which God's grace flowed into his life and extended outward to others. The more he received from God, the more he was empowered to do for others as he actively engaged in growing in grace.

Wesley believed that Christ meets us in our current state through these means of grace, offering us a pathway to deepen our discipleship and grow in our relationship with him. This means anyone can practice them regardless of where they may find themselves in their life's journey. There are no prerequisites to search, approach, and have communion with God except for a willing heart.

With this background, let's start with the first question: What are the means of grace?

John Wesley understood the means of grace as prayer, Scripture reading, Holy Communion, fasting, and Christian conference. He saw and practiced them as vital channels through which God imparts sanctifying grace to us, helping us grow in our love for God and our neighbor. Wesley also emphasized that the means of grace are not methods to earn holiness but are practices that place us where God's grace can work within us, transforming us into Christ's likeness.

Think of these means of grace this way: Prayer connects us directly with God, allowing us to express our deepest desires, confess, and give thanks. Through prayer, we become more

attuned to God's will and our need for his grace. Reading Scripture immerses us in God's living Word, where we find guidance, correction, and encouragement on our path to holiness. Communion, as a sacrament of grace, reminds us of Christ's sacrifice and brings us into a closer spiritual union with him and the church. Fasting deepens our spiritual sensitivity and humility, opening us up to be filled with God's grace. Christian conference, or fellowship, is crucial for spiritual growth, providing a space for spiritual conversations and accountability that encourage, correct, and support our walk with Christ.

These means of grace are more than spiritual tasks or religious practices; they are heartfelt observances that make us receptive to God's transformative work within us. As they position us to receive God's grace, they also enable us to align our lives more closely with Christ's likeness, nurturing a deep, personal relationship with God and embodying his love in our interactions with others.

So, from what we learned last week and what we are learning today, our understanding of holiness from a Wesleyan perspective is about growing in God's love by actively engaging in our spiritual growth as disciples of Jesus Christ through the means of grace.

The apostle John describes this concept succinctly but powerfully when he says in John 1:16, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace."

This is a profound declaration of the boundless generosity of Christ's grace toward us. This verse underpins everything we have discussed about holiness, sanctification, and the means of grace in our Wesleyan tradition. It speaks to the continual outpouring of grace that God offers us, grace that is never exhausted and is always more than sufficient for our needs.

The phrase "From his fullness" refers to the nature of Christ's grace. It implies that Christ possesses an infinite capacity to bestow grace upon humanity. This fullness is not just a reservoir but an ever-flowing fountain of grace that never diminishes, ensuring that we always have access to God's transforming love and power.

Then, "grace upon grace" signifies the idea of continuous and overlapping gifts of grace. Just as one wave follows another in the sea, God's grace is given to us in a never-ending succession. This is emblematic of the journey of sanctification, where each act of receiving grace prepares us for the next, creating a life-long spiritual growth and transformation process. It highlights that our relationship with God through Christ is dynamic and progressive, not static or limited to a single moment of conversion or sanctification.

This understanding of grace tells us that as we engage in prayer, Scripture reading, Holy Communion, fasting, and fellowship, we are not merely performing religious duties. Instead, we are placing ourselves in the path of this ongoing wave of grace, open to the transformative work God wants to do in us. Each means of grace is a conduit for "grace upon grace," allowing us to experience more of God's love and power, shaping us into Christ's likeness.

There is a hymn written by Charles Wesley (a prominent hymn writer and the co-founder of the Methodist movement alongside his brother, John), "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," where he said,

Finish then, Thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be; let us see Thy great salvation perfectly restored in Thee. Changed from glory into glory, till in heav'n we take our place, till we cast our crowns before Thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.

These lines beautifully encapsulate our sanctification journey, highlighting the progressive nature of God's transforming grace. Wesley's plea for God to "finish" his new creation in us speaks to the continuous process of becoming more like Christ—being changed "from glory into glory." This transformation, facilitated by engaging with the means of grace, gradually refines us, moving us closer to the image of Christ.

But then the hymn concludes with a vision of our final transformation in heaven, where the fullness of God's work in us is realized. This reminds us that our earthly journey of sanctification prepares us for the moment we stand in God's presence, fully sanctified, offering ourselves in worship and adoration.

This hymn encourages us to actively participate in our own transformation through prayer, Scripture, Communion, fasting, and fellowship.

In conclusion, I want to finish by answering this question: How do we embrace the means for grace?

**Prayer:** Use these moments to share your thoughts, concerns, and joys with God. It's not just about asking for things but listening for God's voice in the silence of your heart.

**Scripture Reading:** Start with the Gospels to get to know Jesus' life and teachings intimately. Apply what you learn by asking how it can influence your actions and decisions.

**Communion:** Participate in the Lord's Supper regularly. Reflect deeply on Christ's sacrifice for us, and let this sacrament be a time of intimate fellowship with him and a reminder of his love and grace.

**Fasting:** This could mean skipping a meal once a week to spend time in prayer or fasting from social media to focus on your relationship with God.

**Christian Conference (Fellowship):** Actively seek out and participate in Christian community. This could be a small group, a Bible study, or a service group within the church. Share your spiritual journey with others, and let their faith stories inspire and challenge you.

My friends, living out these means of grace is not just for our personal growth but to embody the love and service Jesus modeled. Imitating Christ involves taking tangible steps to love and serve those around us, from simple acts of kindness to more significant commitments to justice and mercy. This active pursuit of holiness, rooted in the Wesleyan tradition, encourages us to embody God's love in our interactions, making holiness not just an internal state but a lived experience of grace impacting the world around us.

Here is the invitation: As we journey through Lent, let us actively seek God's presence in all aspects of life, responding to his grace with open hearts ready for transformation to mirror the compassion and service exemplified by Jesus. Let us embrace these means of grace, allowing them to draw us closer to God and transform us into the image of Christ. Let us be active participants in our spiritual growth, seeking to be "changed from glory into glory" as we live out our faith through love and service.