

The Ordinary Means of Grace

(The Spiritual Disciplines)

There are many ways to grow in the grace of God, but these four disciplines have always been essential in the life of God's people: *Scripture, Prayer, Praise, & Communal Worship*. These means are called "ordinary" because they are *ordained* by God for the strengthening of His people. And the word "ordinary" can also be contrasted from the word extra-ordinary (extraordinary). This helpful to emphasize because the longing for an extraordinary experience can be profoundly misleading. When we expect extraordinary signs to confirm God's power and presence in our lives, then we're often left frustrated, disillusioned, or worse.

So, let's survey these four disciplines—Scripture, prayer, praise and communal worship. And as we survey these, here are two things to keep in mind. (1) Practicing these means of grace will deepen our ability to worship. Worship—simply put—is ascribing worth to God (He is worthy!). So then, in practicing the means of grace, we grow in our ability to *ascribe worth to God*. (2) These practices require a *willingness to explore!* No one can give you the perfect template for practicing the means of grace. It's a lifelong, deeply personal journey. But there are certainly some time-tested, effective methods for practicing these God-ordained means of grace. (I should state that I am using the phrase "means of grace" in its broad sense—and not the more technical sense that has grown up in systematic theology.) And, again, these can also be referred to as spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual Discipline 1: Scripture

Before diving into the specific practices, let's take a moment to talk about the relationship between Scripture and Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, we read that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). In a sense, feeding on Scripture (the written word of God) is tantamount to feeding on Christ (read John 6:25-71 to see that connection). The apostle Paul says, "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great" (1 Timothy 3:16). There is an element of mystery in the concept of feeding on the Lord Jesus Christ. And this feeding is certainly a *spiritual* (not a *physical*) reality. Now, when we talk about feeding on Christ, we are reminded of the Lord's Supper. But feeding on Christ is clearly intended to go beyond this corporate ritual and into our everyday experience. So, practically speaking, how are we to feed on Christ each and every day? In Romans 15:4, Paul says, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." One of the ways we feed on Christ (who is the incarnate Word) is by *feeding on Scripture*.

When we feed properly, the result is *doing the will of God*. And, according to Jesus, *doing the will of God* is the *real* source of spiritual nourishment (read John 4:31-34). So, *that* is what becomes the test of whether we are feeding properly or not. As we engage Scripture, is our engagement actually *enabling us* to do God's will? Jesus also said, "A tree is known by its fruit" (Luke 6:43-45). So, what does the will of God look like in everyday life? How can we actually recognize the "fruit" of God's will in our lives? Jesus provided some very practical illustrations of good and bad fruit—the Good Samaritan is one famous example. And the Apostles' writings also include contrasts between good and bad fruit (e.g. Galatians 5:19-26). So then, the will of God is plainly on display in our thoughts, in our attitudes, and in our actions (head, heart, hands). It is in these *ordinary human faculties* that we recognize the fruit of God's will in our lives. The New Testament emphatically teaches that *love is the greatest manifestation (fruit) of God's will*. If we are feeding properly, then our love for God and our love for others *will be growing*.

And *love* is not a difficult fruit to identify. However, we have many justifications for *not* loving. And these can be so deeply entrenched in us that we don't even recognize the numbness of our own heart. One of the ways that Scripture can align us with the will of God is by exposing these deeply entrenched self-justifications so that we can repent of them. If our hearts are cold, and our love is meager, then one of these two issues is a guarantee:

1. There are certain sins in our life—seen or unseen—that need to be exposed and repented of.
2. We haven't been adequately feeding on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, those two issues clearly overlap. But the time-tested remedy for lack-luster love is the ordinary means of grace (the core spiritual disciplines). But we can't go to these disciplines thinking that we just need to work a little harder to grow in our faith (although that way of thinking can be extremely difficult to overcome). We go to these disciplines because we recognize that they are *gifts from God* for the strengthening of our *faith*, and our *hope*, and our *love*.

God uses these ordinary means of grace to mold us. We are *never* molding ourselves into the image of Christ. There is an element of *self-discipline* in spiritual growth, but as the fruits of our spiritual growth begins to show, we also become conscious of the fact that we were *called* to these practices—it wasn't simply a matter of our own self-discipline. We recognize that God *called us* to these disciplines, and then He poured out His grace in our lives when we answered *His call*. Paul says it very nicely: "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

Now, let's turn to the practices. Here are eleven different ways to *feed on Scripture*: Teaching & preaching, singing & praying, reading & studying, listening & sharing, memorizing & meditating, and (lastly) applying.

Teaching & Preaching

God has provided the Church with members who are especially gifted at teaching & preaching Scripture. Teaching and preaching are not as sharply separated as some traditions have emphasized. The two practices often intertwine and overlap. Good teaching often includes elements of preaching. And good preaching certainly involves elements of teaching. It's helpful to think of *light* and *heat*. Teaching stresses an *understanding of the text*—providing us with light. While preaching stresses the *relevance and vitality of the text*—providing us with heat. It's important for each of us to find a gifted teacher that can guide us into a deeper and richer knowledge of Scripture.

Singing & Praying

There are songs and prayers throughout the whole of Scripture, but the book of Psalms is completely devoted to song and prayer. The book of Psalms has been called *the songbook of the worshiping community*, and it's also been called *a guidebook for prayer*. So then, whether we're seeking rich biblical content for singing, or deep and penetrating content for prayer, the book of Psalms is without equal. It may take time, however, to appreciate the depth and richness of the Psalter (which was certainly true for me). And that's one more reason why we need to pursue a gifted teacher. As our knowledge of Scripture grows, then our appreciation of the unique genres will grow as well. The book of Psalms is a powerful combination of poetry, theology, and praise.

Praying: One of the barriers to a rich prayer life is a nagging sense that our prayers are lacking direction. Praying Scripture is an excellent way to overcome that feeling—whether we're praying the Psalms or any of the other Scriptures. And we'll talk about others forms of prayer later on.

Reading & Studying

Some traditions treat the bare reading of Scripture as a spiritual practice—emphasizing the aesthetic qualities of the reading. But reading *divorced from understanding* is of no spiritual benefit (1 Cor. 14:14-15). Again, this is why it's incredibly important to pursue gifted teachers. And this is also why a good Study Bible becomes an invaluable resource. As we read through Scripture, we will encounter passages that we don't understand. And instead of simply reading through this material without making sense of it, we ought to pause and refer to the study notes to see if they can help us to make more sense of what we're reading.

Studying: Studying the Bible can be contrasted from *reading* the Bible in that study is a more time-consuming and rigorous approach to Bible comprehension. It might be helpful to concentrate on *reading* at certain times, and then to set aside other times for more rigorous study. Gifted Bible teachers will have spent many hours in rigorous study, and they often make use of a wide range of supplemental resources. But many of us are not called to be teachers (James 3:1), and so we need to find a gifted teacher and learn from them.

Listening & Sharing

Listening to Scripture is probably more convenient now than it ever has been. And this discipline can be profoundly rewarding. Prior to the printing press, the vast majority of believers only ever *heard* Scripture. Introspective reading is good and helpful, but we're missing the *auditory impact* of Scripture if we don't *hear the words spoken*. Presently, there is an abundance of technology that can play the Scriptures continuously. Finding the right audio Bible will likely be a matter of exploration—e.g. plain Bible readings, readings with music, readings without music, dramatized versions, etc. If we take a minute to consider how much time we spend listening to audio—in our cars, on the television, on the internet or social media—we can probably substitute some of this time with listening to the Bible. And if we find ourselves constantly tuning-out the Bible audio, then it might be helpful to grab an actual Bible and read-a-long with the audio. Personally, when I began listening to an audio Bible in my car, I eventually lost my appetite for the radio altogether. Audio Bibles are certainly worth exploring!

Sharing: Sharing Scripture is an incredibly powerful discipline. When we begin to share the Scriptures (with Christians or non-Christians) we become acutely aware of how skillful or how clumsy we are in this respect (2 Tim. 2:15). We need to embrace an attitude of openness, honesty, and humility when we're sharing Scripture. We've all experienced how off-putting it can be when someone pretends to know something they really don't know—so we should be careful *not* to do that ourselves! We should be completely open about the things we don't know because it isn't up to us whether someone will accept the truth or reject it. Jesus clearly taught that *the Father draws people to Himself* (John 6:44)—yet He uses *our obedience* to accomplish *His will!* Humility and faithfulness are key here. If we expect to see a certain outcome, then we are actually displaying a kind of arrogance—because spiritual power belongs to *God alone*. For our part, we need to concentrate on being *faithful*, and allow the Lord to build the house (Psalm 127:1).

Finally, contemporary Christian leaders have voiced the importance and the effectiveness of one-to-one Bible study. This is especially true in Western countries where people are deeply cynical of “the sage on the stage” approach to religious teaching. However, many who are cynical in this respect will readily listen to someone who they know from ordinary life (what an incredible opportunity for everyone in the pew!).

Memorizing & Meditating

Many Christians, including myself, have benefitted from the memorization of Scripture passages. We should be careful, however, to avoid these two pitfalls: The first pitfall is quoting passages in isolation from their original meaning. We need to know *why something was said* before we can use the verse properly. The second pitfall is thinking that once we memorize a passage, we now “know” that passage. Memorization and *understanding* are two very different capacities. *Understanding* is the much greater priority, but memorization remains a very helpful aid.

Meditating: Meditating on Scripture is a very rich discipline with a wide range of possible forms. Some might prefer to meditate on a single phrase. For example: Each line of the Lord’s Prayer is brimming with deep and meaningful concepts. So, instead of attempting to meditate on the Lord’s Prayer *in its entirety*, we can stop after a simple statement like: “Our Father who is in heaven”. That single phrase is of immense significance to the believer—it is filled with biblical history and theology. Slowly and quietly contemplating the *meaning* of this phrase—“Our Father who is in heaven”—can be incredibly stabilizing. A different form of Scripture meditation is methodically working through passage after passage. In one sense, any book of Bible can serve as a material for slow and deliberate meditation. But the wisdom & poetry genre is especially designed for this purpose (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, etc.).

To be fruitful, meditation will require lots of patience, discipline, and growth in biblical theology. At either end of the meditation spectrum—whether we’re meditating on one phrase or on long passages—there are some common characteristics. *Characteristic 1:* The more biblical theology we understand, the richer our meditation can become. As we demonstrated with the Lord’s Prayer, small phrases in Scripture are often loaded with significance. But we won’t *see* all of the significance without learning more! *Characteristic 2:* The more we practice meditation, the more enriching it becomes. If we actually begin to experience real spiritual benefit from the practice, then it will begin to grip us and become a stabilizing feature of our daily routine—we’ll crave it!

Characteristic 3: Historical details (including culture and geography) can enrich our meditation. These details can help us to *visualize* the scenes and imagery associated with the passage. Study Bibles, commentaries, companion guides, etc.—these are all designed to help us accumulate more historical context. *Characteristic 4:* Distraction is a common enemy. One of the suggestions here is *not* to get frustrated with distraction. Instead of becoming frustrated with yourself, try to respond to your distracted mind with a very deliberate patience (e.g. it’s okay, this is part of the process)—and continually return to the text and resume the meditation. No one is grading us on our spiritual disciplines (or at least they shouldn’t be!), and if we can’t temper our own frustration, this might be a sign that we are approaching this in a legalistic spirit. Patience not frustration. This principle is also helpful to remember in our personal prayers.

Applying

In one sense, the application of Scripture to life is completely beyond our control. We cannot transform our own hearts—we cannot sanctify ourselves! Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit. However, we are certainly called to a life of self-discipline (1 Cor. 9:24-27). So, even though we cannot sanctify ourselves, we can commit ourselves to certain practices (the means of grace/spiritual disciplines!). Application (in the deepest sense of the word) happens more *naturally* than it does *systematically*. In other words, we can’t force spiritual growth. As Scripture continues to reorient the way we think, this will also reorient the way we feel and the way we act. If we want to experience that process of change, then we need to learn to *listen to the Scriptures with our conscience* (i.e. existential listening).

Application is more like a *slow and steady exercise of the soul* than it is a matter of *intellectual training*. At the same time, we can't discredit the value and the importance of intellectual training. Paul says to "take every *thought* captive and make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). Intellectual training is important, but soul-deep transformation requires a *conscience that is sensitive to the Spirit-filled words of Scripture*. How is this text speaking to my heart?

Application is not just about our own personal growth—application involves the people around us. If our own sanctification is lacking, then it will be very difficult (if not impossible) to have a positive spiritual influence on others. Paul says it like this: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Spiritual Discipline 2: Prayer

Adoration: praising the character and attributes of God.

Confession: acknowledging personal sin and repenting of it.

Thanksgiving: giving thanks to God for His many blessings.

Supplication: asking for God's provision in specific areas of life.

When we were talking about those eleven ways to feed on Scripture, one of the subjects we covered was *praying Scripture*. But we're now focusing on our personal prayer. I remember hearing the testimony of a young woman who had never prayed her own prayer because the tradition she had grown up in encouraged her to either recite the prayers of other saints or (if necessary) to formalize her own prayer on paper before praying it to God—and this was necessary to ensure her prayers were *formally* correct. And when this young woman realized that praying freely was not wrong, she experienced an incredible boost in her prayer life and a deeper sense of intimacy with God. Personal prayer is an immensely important practice in the life of a believer.

Structuring our prayers can certainly be helpful, and many have found the *ACTS acrostic* to be a helpful guide for personal prayer. Adoration—praising the attributes and actions of God. Confession—readily acknowledging our own sin. Thanksgiving—acknowledging the goodness of God in His many provisions. Supplication—requesting God's assistance in specific situations (spiritual health, physical health, finances, family, friends, occupation, and the list goes on).

Here are several things to think about with regard to prayer. (1) It is a discipline. If we only pray when we *feel* like praying, then we won't make any progress. (2) The more concrete our prayers are, the more rewarding they will be. If we pray in generalities, then we are missing the point of offering *personal* prayers to God. (3) It can be very helpful to begin our time of prayer with meditation upon Scripture—slowly and thoughtfully reading through a section of Scripture, and then moving to a time of personal prayer. (4) It can be helpful to keep a written prayer guide on hand—one that will help to direct our prayer without stifling our ability to pray freely. A list of bullet points is a good example.

(5) Finally, patience and persistence are important. If we get frustrated because our minds keep wandering, or we can't settle down enough to deeply meditate, then we need to remind ourselves that we are submitting this time *to God*. It's not *our* time—it's *His* time. The standards of efficiency and effectiveness are not helpful here. We should patiently and persistently return our minds to our prayer, and even consider incorporating those things that our mind keeps turning to. Remember, prayer is not about *feeling* spiritual. Prayer is an offering of our time, our thoughts, and our affections *to God*. Many have shared that once their prayer life was firmly established as a daily discipline, it became a rich source of joy, comfort, and hope—a discipline they wouldn't miss for anything! David puts it this way in Psalm 37: "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Spiritual Discipline 3: Praise

Ephesians 5:19, “speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord”. If we object to this command, then we should know that we’re not the first to do so. This is a common response: “I’m not musically gifted, so how can I be expected to sing as a daily discipline?” In my opinion, I think *singing* is negotiable—i.e. there are other ways to praise the Lord. But we are certainly neglecting a command (which is harmful to us) if we do not learn to praise the Lord. So then, we should learn to praise the Lord in a form that’s appropriate for us. Remember, navigating the means of grace requires *a willingness to explore!* Here are three examples outside of singing:

(1) An elevated reading of the praises found in Scripture—and there are many to choose from. (2) The very old practice of *chanting praises to God* is still a vibrant Christian tradition today. (3) We can also read aloud God-praising poetry. And the list goes on. But we need to take this command seriously. Praising God *is not optional*. Yes, it is to the glory of God... but our own soul is immensely gratified as we learn to praise the Lord! That is what the psalmist means when he says, “You, LORD, are *worthy of praise*” (Psalm 145). When our praise is directed *elsewhere*, then the return is no good. When we praise the Lord, our soul is filled with the richness of God’s blessing. We can certainly experiment with different methods, but the impetus is on us—*we must praise the Lord!*

A couple of quick things to note: Praise helps us to engage our emotions. Praise actually goes beyond the words that are spoken, or chanted, or sung. Words *alone* simply cannot express the fullness of our awe and wonder—our gratitude and humility—as we contemplate *who God is and all that He has accomplished*. Also, this is an “out-loud” activity. We need to *raise our voices* in praise and adoration. The more time we give to this, the more joy we will derive from it. But it truly isn’t about *us*... it’s about *Him*. It just so happens that we benefit greatly when God is exalted in our lives. I said, “it just so happens”—but really, it’s part and parcel of God’s created order. When *He* is truly magnified, *all* of creation benefits. How do we know what to praise God for? Let’s phrase that in a more leading way: Where can we find content for praising God? You guessed it—the Scriptures. And of course, there are many, many additional resources available. But if the resources do not *clearly reflect the teaching of Scripture*, then they are *not worth using* to praise God. The impetus is on us: *We should praise the Lord each and every day.*

Spiritual Discipline 4: Communal Worship

The NT makes it clear that the people of God are to gather for the express purpose of *worshipping Him*. While this is indeed an obligation, it is an incredible privilege—one that stretches all the way back to Genesis chapter 4—when men began to “call upon the name of the LORD.” When we do anything *together* it requires a pattern for everyone follow—without a pattern we’re not *together*. So our worship is patterned—and it always has been.

Now, when Jesus died and rose again, the pattern of worship changed dramatically. The ritual of *sacrifice in worship* was fulfilled and superseded (Romans 10:4). Jesus *was* the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 10). He *fulfilled* the Law (Matt. 5:17-20). And because Christ fulfilled the ritual of sacrifice, Christians no longer follow that pattern of worship. Sacrifice, however, was a core competent of the Law of Moses. And so we can see why Christianity and Judaism clashed so violently in the New Testament. Christians were following a radically new pattern of worship—one that *excluded sacrifice*.

Now, one of the classic texts for the Christian pattern of worship is Acts 2:42, “...they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” And, in varying measure, we find each of these elements represented in Christian worship today.

In the discipline of communal worship, the community of believers (more intimately called the *family* of believers) *comes together* to call upon the name of the Lord and receive His blessing. The idea of following Christ outside a unified body of believers is antithetical to the pattern set forth in the New Testament. The pinnacle activity for the family of faith is to gather for worship. And this means of grace (spiritual discipline) implies both *church membership* and *participation in the sacraments* (ordinances) of baptism and communion. As the members of the church come together to call upon the name of the Lord, His grace is poured out on all who participate in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

Conclusion

So that was a practical survey of the means of grace (*the spiritual disciplines*): Scripture, Prayer, Praise, and Communal Worship. These four disciplines are of the highest priority. These four disciplines will deepen our worship. And worship sanctifies our soul!

In addition to the communal gathering of the whole church for worship, we can (and should) worship as *individuals* and as *families*. Family worship is grossly neglected. And because of this neglect, many parents feel ill-equipped to lead their families in worship. Because it hasn't been modeled for them. But family worship isn't complicated: read & explain Scripture, pray together, and praise the Lord. Start small... ask for guidance... it's incredibly important to learn to worship *as a family*.

I hope this has been a helpful introduction to the means of grace, and I hope you're willing to explore and practice these regularly. Practicing the means of grace will deepen our worship, and sanctify our soul, and bring glory to Christ our King. That is why we should *prioritize the means of grace!*