

MEANS OF GRACE, 3 pgs

Exercise [train, discipline] **yourself toward godliness** [the best area to work on] ... [because] godliness is profitable for all things, having the promise of life that now is and of that which is to come ... to this end we both labor and struggle [strive; some manuscripts (NKJ) read "suffer reproach"] because we trust in the living God ... **1 Tim.4:7-10**.

John Wesley taught that God's grace is unearned and that we were not to be idle waiting to experience grace but we are to engage in exercising the means of grace. **The means of grace are ways God works invisibly in disciples, hastening, strengthening; and confirming faith so that God's grace permeates in and through them.**

There have been and still are pockets in the world where life is easy. In rich countries like the US and **under the prosperous circumstances** of our day, the pursuit of God necessarily involves personal discipline. We must discipline ourselves to overcome absorption in and molding by the world - to overcome the enticement of naturalism toward **personal peace and affluence** and learn to love God, His Word, and each other. It is the way we offset error and avoid greed, and grow and mature in Christ. Because of the abundance of good things we have to enjoy, **we live in constant peril** [danger] of having our hearts stolen by those very blessings. Clarity of mind and heart is expensive in prosperity. In some third world countries and other places where life is hard and followers of Christ are persecuted by oppressive governments, hateful religions, or destructive ideologies, **the trials themselves serve to drive spiritual discipline**. They do not have to force themselves to work at the means of grace.¹ The very difficulties themselves serve to focus the attention of God's people on what really matters. There are fewer things [distractions] to cloud the hope of the Gospel, and life is much simpler, choices and issues clearer. The following is a discussion of the **means of grace** available for those of us who need **the regimen of those disciplines** because of the circumstances of ease and prosperity in which we live.

Historically many disciplines (often in the form of some physical self-denial or deprivation, self-inflicted pain, punishment, or suffering) have been employed ostensibly to draw nearer to God: abstinence; chastity; fasting; solitude; silence; simplicity; poverty; frugality; etc. But people tended to look upon these works of the flesh as if they were godliness, rather than disciplines toward godliness.

Christian life involves four areas of personal discipline [for growth and maturity] which may be categorized (no particular order) as:

MEDITATION - Bible reading, study, thinking through, etc.;

WORSHIP (communication with God) - adoration, rejoicing, prayer, praise, intercession, thanksgiving, supplication, etc.;

FELLOWSHIP (community, communication with one another) - 2 types of interaction: (1) getting to know and keeping up with one another, (2) gathering around the Word, specifically discussing scripture, examining subjects from a biblical perspective, and planning spiritual projects together;

SERVICE - ministering the gospel, helping others, visiting, teaching, witnessing, etc. (active involvement in contributing to the welfare of others). [I've also included STEWARDSHIP (management of time, resources, and gifts) here. Some make EVANGELISM a separate category from SERVICE or MINISTRY].

These four areas are comprehensive in that **they accommodate the whole of the Christian life**, ie. every other activity is includable within them.² They are not only disciplines, they are also our fulfillment.³ That is, they are not an end in themselves, they are means of drawing near to God, of pursuing holiness. What other labors of love is so satisfying and full of joy as these? - not because of the disciplines themselves, but because they are the means by which we partake of His grace. This implies that each of us will suffer from lack of fulfillment [a reduced sense of meaning, purpose, and significance] to the extent that we neglect any aspect of these means. **Neglect fosters disconnectedness** with God, spiritual realities, and each other. We become attached to all kinds of lesser things that offer a counterfeit satisfaction. Reality slips through our fingers and we lose ourselves. Through these disciplines, we learn of Christ and partake of His life. He becomes real to us and we know who we are, what we are about, and the difference we make. **The disciplines themselves are not godliness. They are the means by which we deny ourselves, take up His cross, and follow Him.**⁴ Therefore let us administer the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ to one another.

*¹⁷Therefore, dear friends, since you have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen, **2Pt.3**:*

1. From time to time, hardship also comes to Christians in prosperity and our protective pockets collapse. It is devastating to those who have not cultivated the habit of discipline toward godliness through the means of grace. Intrusion into our comfort zone and disruption of our lifestyle is upsetting. Losing those things we have come to love shocks us. It tells us that, unlike pilgrims, we have become too attached to this world. It also comments on how ready we are to leave and our preparedness for Christ's return. Better to repent now. JESUS IS LORD.

Phil.2:9-11. *Return to God's arms and start working out your salvation with fear and trembling (v.12), for God is the one working in you to both will and do His good pleasure, v.13.*

2. I have not included here the concept of the **sacraments** like baptism and communion as inculcated in Covenant Theology. The connotations carried by applying the term **sacraments** to these vary with different church traditions but have the common but vague element of being a means of imparting some special grace to the participants.

3. Example of applying your creative energies to God's means of grace - You know who you will likely see at a certain meeting or place and recognize areas where they are being tested or need strengthening. Begin praying for their up-building in Christ. Keep them in mind as you read the Bible [as well as books and recorded messages] and look for passages to share with them. Study those passages and pray for understanding. Ask God for sensitivity and opportunity to share with that

person. If none presents, design the occasion and share your insights with them. As you can see, such a planned approach involves all four areas of spiritual discipline. Who knows where such a path will take you and the joy of it?

4. Why take the means as only personal? Why not structure body [corporate church] life around them as well?

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Godliness with contentment is great gain for we brought nothing into this world and it is certain we can carry nothing out. Let us be content [satisfied] with food and clothing. Those who desire [resolve] to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown [plunge, sink] men into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil for which some have strayed [wandered away] from the faith [teachings of Scripture] in their greediness [craving] and pierced themselves through with many sorrows, **1 Tim.6:6-10**.

[God's] divine power ... has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness ...exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these [disciplines] you may become partakers of the divine nature having escaped the corruption [decay, rottenness] that is in the world through lust [sinful desire]. For this very reason, giving all diligence [working hard at it], add [supply] virtue [excellence – in wisdom, ethics, etc] to your faith, and to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, to brotherly kindness love. If these [qualities] are yours and are abounding [increasing, growing], you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who lacks these [through neglect] is blind being nearsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure [by cultivating these qualities], for **if you do these things you will never stumble**; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, **2 Pt.1:2-11**.