

Sermon June 20, 2021 Spirituality of the Cross Part III The Means of Grace

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Parts I and II of the current sermon series presented the teaching on which it is said the church stands or falls. That teaching is *Justification by Faith*. It flows right out of Romans chapter three where the Apostle Paul says,

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Romans 3:28

Many people simply do not accept this, considering it just too good to be true. If we have this peace with God, surely we must contribute something to make it happen. That is how the world works. In this case, however, we contribute absolutely nothing to our salvation, and that is too difficult for many people to believe. Justification by faith sounds easy enough, but it is a surprisingly difficult rule to live by! One of the reasons it is such a hard path to follow is the divine substance that sets us and keeps us on the path has been downplayed or removed altogether. This substance I am talking about is God's *Means of Grace* and is the topic for this sermon.

The thing we all have in common is we want God in our lives. If everything said about God is true, then we want it. We want him. We'll take more of that good stuff every day of our lives. But how? How do we encounter God's presence in this world and most importantly in our lives? Many of us have had training or at least know about CPR – Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation. When someone gets into trouble and stops breathing, CPR can be used to keep them alive until help comes or even bring them all the way back to consciousness. With CPR, the one administering it takes air from their lungs and breathes it out into the lungs of the dying person. The person receiving CPR can't breathe on their own, so getting air from the other person gives the body the oxygen it needs to stay alive. Keep that illustration in mind as we consider this next Bible passage;

All Scripture is breathed out by God ... 2 Timothy 3:16

We need and want the presence of God in our lives. We need God's help even to be justified by faith. Our spirits rely on a sort of oxygen from God to survive and be strong. God breathes that out in the Scriptures – his Word. We breathe it in when we hear that same word of God for ourselves, it enters our souls, and gives us life. Its that simple.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. Romans 10:17

When God breathes his word into us, faith is created and nurtured. Then, desiring even more to have the presence of God in our lives, God reminds us in Hebrews chapter 4,

For the word of God is living and active ... Hebrews 4:12

When we hear or read the Word, we have a personal encounter with God. Jesus Christ is the living Word, who comes to us every time we encounter the Word of God. This is why the Word is called a *means of grace*. When we hear it and read it, God comes to us, breathes his breath into us, and we receive for our very own every grace, truth, and blessing contained in that Word. Good stuff!

Just like God gives us not only air to live on, but also gives us water to drink and food to eat, so God gives us more than his breath alone in the Word. He also gives us drink and solid food for our faith in the sacraments. Sacraments are holy rituals God tells his church to perform, they always contain earthly elements, and they bestow God's grace. In our tradition there are three sacraments: Baptism; Confession; and Holy Communion. In this series I hope to cover Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Let's move on then to Holy Baptism.

When we live in the spirituality of the cross, our spirituality is always receptive. We are passive. God is the one acting, doing good things for us. Salvation does not take place because of human moral effort, gaining knowledge, or having a superior mystical experience. Salvation is a gift we simply receive from God. Jesus speaks about this nature in Matthew chapter 18;

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Mathew 18:3

Little children are helpless to help themselves. We take the same posture as God's children. Looking to him and receiving from him every good gift. Baptism is a wonderful, life changing and faith changing experience. In baptism, God assumes our identity into himself. We become a new person with a new family, a new Father, and a new story. We may often wonder if we believe enough, do enough, have dedicated ourselves enough to be saved. In baptism, God gives us his eternal "Yes." Rather than looking to ourselves for the evidence of salvation (which we may not find), we look to God's work in our baptism for reassurance and a renewal of our faith.

The second means of grace is Holy Communion. In his book, Dr. Veith says that in the sacrament of Holy Communion, all of Lutheran spirituality is crystallized. That's a pretty good way of seeing the Lord's Supper. Here, the "spiritual" and the "material" – so often put at odds by other religious views and philosophy - are joined together like nowhere else. The Word of God is breathed into bread and wine, and something new is created – the meal of God's blessing and fellowship that will not end with this age, but will continue into eternity. Imagine that! In baptism we are given residence with the Triune God. In the Lord's Supper we have a personal, physical encounter with Jesus Christ. How can this be? It is beyond the knowing of any mortal being. Again, rather than explain it away to our loss, we simply receive the blessing and benefit God bestows, and let him worry about the how, the why, and we let him do all the heavy lifting.

Martin Luther said in his commentary on the Psalms, "The cross alone is our Theology." We also say that in Holy Communion we receive the fruits of the cross: forgiveness, spiritual life, unity with God and all his people, renewal of our membership in God's eternal family. How can we be so sure? We focus on the critical words Jesus spoke at the Supper's institution. Jesus said, "This is my body given for you," and, "This is my blood shed for you." For who? YOU! Not perfect people. Not those to your right or to your left. You. You. You. The body and blood of Christ were given and shed for you. Those are the key words for our faith to hear, grab, and take to heart. Then the gifts declared in the sacrament become ours!

The Means of God's Grace – the Word and Sacraments, give faith and then nourish faith throughout our lives. God breathes into us the breath of his Word

and gives us to drink of the water of the Spirit and the sacrificial food of the cross. The spirit and creation are combined to yield tangible, material means God uses to bring us the Gospel of Christ who converts us, feeds us, and accompanies us in his church. Amen.

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