

KNOWING & DOING

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Are You Growing in Grace?

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Would you like to experience the fullness and blessing of life in Christ? Would you like your life to fulfill God's purposes for you in the world? If your answer is yes, keep reading.

Most believers are familiar with the great Bible truth that we are saved by grace through faith alone, not by our works (Eph. 2:8–9). Some are not so familiar with the Bible truth that God intends for us to *grow* in grace. We see this in many places, but it is especially clear when the apostle Peter urges his readers (and us) to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).¹ By this, Peter means that we are to grow and mature in our understanding and experience of the grace we have received and also in our knowledge about and experience of Christ. This is the way we enter more fully into the abundant life Jesus gives us (John 10:10).

Unfortunately, many in the church receive God's grace but for various reasons do not grow much in grace. As a result, they needlessly miss out on great blessings God wants to bestow on them and run the risk of not fulfilling God's purposes for their lives.

How do baptized believers grow in grace? It would be nice if we matured automatically, but God calls us to actively pursue growth in grace. Jesus, for example, tells His disciples to, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). Paul says to the Philippians, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). Again, active engagement is required of us. This does not mean that through our own efforts we are the source of our own transformation, but it does mean that we have an important part to play in the process. Ultimately God is the source of our transformation, but He does it through a process that requires us to play a vital and indispensable role. In other words, God uses means—means of grace—to bring about our growth.

What are some of the means God uses to bring about our growth in grace? Although God can use various means at different times to help us grow, the primary and essential ones are listed in Acts 2:42. In this passage, we see how the Holy Spirit led the first church, composed of some three thousand newly converted baptized people, to grow in grace: “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The context indicates that these activities were not a form of liturgy, but practices adopted so widely by individual believers that they characterized the entire three thousand. These four activities, taken together, formed the foundation of personal and corporate life in the early church. They weren't the only ones God used, but they were the essential ones.

The believers *devoted* themselves to these spiritually edifying and transformative practices. In the Greek text, the strong word translated *devoted* (*proskartereo*) means “hold fast to something, continue or persevere in something.”² In other words, they persevered in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers—not just one or two of these activities, as we might today, but all four of them. And they discovered that these were the primary means by which God caused them to grow in His grace. This pattern has recurred in

church history in times of renewal and revival, when the Spirit of God seeks to bring the church back to authentic spiritual vitality and discipleship.

Let's look at these practices one by one to see what they are, what they involve, and how they can help us and our churches grow in grace today.

The Apostles' Teaching

Originally, the *apostles' teaching* referred to what the apostles preached and taught orally about Jesus. His words and deeds, especially His atoning death and resurrection, were the focal point of their teaching. This drew on parts of the Old Testament (the only Bible they had at the time) to explain Jesus' identity, life, and ministry. Eventually their teachings were put into written form in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. If we want to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching today, we should focus first on Jesus as He is presented in the Gospels and further explained in the Epistles and the Old Testament.



What are some practical ways to do this? First, we should regularly attend a church where the Bible is honored as God's Word written and is faithfully preached and taught. In addition, we should regularly, preferably daily, read the Bible. (There are many resources for this: *The One Year Bible* takes you through the Scriptures in a year. You can find a number of other Bible reading plans at YouVersion.com.) Reading the Bible will raise questions that require some study, so you'll want to have at hand some basic reference tools, such as a good study Bible (ESV and NIV study Bibles are very good), Bible dictionary, concordance, and commentary. Bible study groups that focus on a particular theme can be helpful. Memorizing and meditating on key Bible verses is a valuable part of the transformation process, helping to integrate what we grasp with our intellects into the rest of our hearts (emotions, wills, desires).

The goal of devoting ourselves to the apostles' teaching is not simply to gain information, as critically important as that is, but to know God, which is the essence of eternal life (John 17:3). Through the Scriptures, we learn of God's character, His great deeds, His love for us, His will for us, His ways, His promises, and so much more. The Holy Spirit uses these truths as a major part of the process of transformation—of becoming conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

For this to happen, it is important to pray *before* we read or study the Bible and ask the Spirit to open our minds and hearts to understand the meaning of His Word and how it applies to our lives (Ps. 119:18). The Holy Spirit's illumination is essential for us to rightly grasp and receive God's word into our lives (Matt. 11:25–27; 1 Cor. 2:12–13). As we earnestly seek God in this manner, He will communicate with us in very personal ways. In addition to receiving the Spirit's illumination, we must bring to the Scripture an essential attitude of heart: a settled intention to obey whatever God shows us to be His will. Failure to do this will lead to increasing self-deception (James 1:22–25).

Fellowship

The second means of grace is *fellowship*, a translation of the Greek word *koinonia*, meaning “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.”³ In this context, *koinonia* means active participation in the community of believers through sharing of one's life and resources. True *koinonia* develops

Christ-centered friendships that lead to sharing one another's joys and sorrows, bearing one another's burdens, and generally supporting one another spiritually, emotionally and materially in the ups and downs of life. The material aspect of sharing is seen in Acts 2:44–45 and 4:32. These texts highlight the voluntary sharing of material possessions among believers to meet personal needs. However, such radical generosity is just one expression of their common faith and love in Jesus and the corporate life it produces. The small house churches of the early Christians provided a congenial environment for such relational growth.

Devoting ourselves to fellowship/*koinonia* is far more than casual conversation over coffee and donuts between church services. It begins with developing authentic relationships with other believers in our church or circle of friends. This requires a willingness to open our lives to them and to become involved in their lives as well. Intentionality and time are necessary for such relationships to grow deep and strong, and this requires a commitment. As in the early church, the best way to develop *koinonia* is through small groups that meet in homes. In today's busy culture, some people are finding groups of three or four of the same sex to be easiest—to attend consistently and to share at greater depth.

A good action step? Ask God to lead you to a few people with whom you can develop close and lasting Christ-centered friendships; make a list of whoever comes to mind and explore the possibilities with them. Needless to say, you must make a definite commitment of time to develop such relationships. The rewards of these friendships far exceed the time and effort required, for we learn how to love and serve others and allow them to love and serve us, and in the process we discover that God meets us and ministers to us through one another.

The Breaking of Bread

The breaking of bread is the third means of grace in this verse. The basic meaning of the phrase is to eat a meal. For Jews (who made up the earliest church) a meal began with breaking a loaf of bread and giving thanks. But in this context, the phrase means more. It appears to be a reference to Communion, or the Lord's Supper, which was originally part of a larger meal shared when the early church assembled each week (Acts 20:7). The breaking of bread was a highlight in the worship life of the believing community, a time of unity in celebrating the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus and His impending return. At some point, the Communion was separated from the community meal and became part of the Sunday worship liturgy.

Today there is a range of understanding and practice regarding the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholics celebrate it weekly or even daily; Anglicans and various Protestant denominations range from weekly to quarterly. It seems the earliest Christians celebrated it as part of their weekly gathering for worship. Opinions vary about whether the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (Roman Catholics) or remind us of Christ's death and resurrection (Baptists and many other Protestants). Whatever the exact significance, Paul's sober warning to the Corinthian church indicates that God takes Communion seriously indeed, and so should we. It is far more than consuming a bit of bread and wine. In Corinth, failure to participate in the Lord's Supper with the proper attitude of heart and mind brought God's judgment on the offending parties (1 Cor.11:17–34). For this reason, Protestants and Catholics have long encouraged people to prepare their hearts before receiving Communion.

Preparation of heart, which is best done *before* the Communion service, involves looking back in sober remembrance and sustained reflection on the sacrificial love of Jesus for us, demonstrated through His atoning death. It also involves looking back over our lives in light of this and asking God to search our hearts and show us any unconfessed or unrepented sins or broken relationships that we



need to reconcile. Over the centuries, both Protestants and Catholics have testified to having intimate encounters with Christ in the Lord's Supper, and we should be open to this. Those who receive the Lord's Supper rightly and regularly find it a means of deepening their love and gratitude to Jesus for His amazing grace and love.

Prayer

The fourth means of grace is *prayer*. The Greek text says, *the prayers*, suggesting that at this early period, when the newly converted disciples were still gathering in the Temple precincts, they were also praying some of the traditional Jewish prayers. But Jesus had taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer, and no doubt they were using it, as well as free, extemporaneous prayers. Prayer was a major part of the life of the church in Acts and was connected with extraordinary answers (Acts 4:23–31; 12:1–17).

Prayer is something we must learn. The way we learn to pray is by praying. Reading books on prayer can be helpful, but this is not a substitute for the action itself. Fortunately Jesus gave us a pattern to guide our praying and help us mature in prayer. It is usually called the Lord's Prayer, but it should be called the Disciples' Prayer, because it was given to the disciples as a pattern, a guide, a framework for their prayer lives (Matt. 6:9–13). It seems very simple at first, but it contains six petitions that cover the main areas on which our prayer should focus. The more we ponder each of these, the more we discover the comprehensive scope of this prayer. Over the centuries, this prayer has been the primary resource for learning to pray, followed by the Psalms.

If we are devoting ourselves to the Scriptures, we will discover many promises from God. And if we are living in true fellowship/*koinonia*, we will have much to pray about. Praying with others is an important element of prayer. A prayer partner or a triplet or quad is a great way not only to grow in prayer, but also to develop deeper *koinonia*. As we learn how to pray rightly and see God answer our prayers, we will grow in our gratitude, trust, and intimacy with Him and faith in His Word.

Summary

You may have noticed that these four means of grace seem to be interconnected. In fact, they are deeply connected because the Holy Spirit energizes and integrates them in ways that help transform us. When we, like the first church, devote ourselves to all four, the Spirit uses each to intensify the others in a divine synergy that propels us forward in grace. On the other hand, when one or two are neglected or sluggish, our spiritual vitality is greatly diminished. How is it with you? Are you devoted to all four of these essential means of grace? If not, ask God to help you, then take whatever action is necessary. As you use God's appointed means of grace consistently and with perseverance, trusting the Holy Spirit to work through them, your relationship with Christ will deepen and increase in strength, vitality, fruitfulness, and joy. ❖

Prayer is either a sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer, in the sense of petition, asking for things, is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us. That He answers prayers is a corollary—not necessarily the most important one—from that revelation. What He does is learned from what He is.

Notes:

1. Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.
2. William, F. Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 723.
3. *Ibid.*, 438.



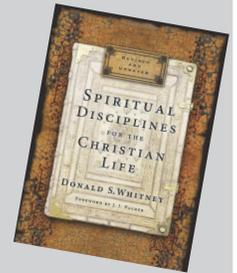
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RECOMMENDED READING

Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, forward by J.I. Packer (NavPress 2014 (updated revised edition))

Drawn from a rich heritage, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* will guide you through a carefully selected array of disciplines. By illustrating why the disciplines are important, showing how each one will help you grow in godliness, and offering practical suggestions for cultivating them, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* will provide you with a refreshing opportunity to become more like Christ and grow in character and maturity. Now updated and revised to equip a new generation of readers, this anniversary edition features in-depth discussions on each of the key disciplines.

This guide draws from the rich heritage left us by the early church fathers, the Puritan writers, and Jesus Himself to lead group members or individuals through a carefully selected array of disciplines, including Scripture reading, meditation and application, prayer, worship, evangelism, stewardship, fasting, silence and solitude, and journaling.



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