

Legacy: Remember Your Path

**Deuteronomy 10:12-21
Ephesians 4:1-6, 14-17**

God gives us means to grow in grace.

A sermon preached by
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During the Cold War years, the official philosophy of the Soviet Communist state was atheism, and the Russian Orthodox Church, the national religion, endured persecution. Many of their churches fell into disuse. But after the fall of the Soviet Union, religion became more acceptable, and the church began to grow. In 2008, Orthodox Church officials decided to re-open an old church northeast of Moscow, but they discovered that the church building had disappeared. Poof—gone! The 200-year-old building simply wasn't there anymore.

They had to get to the bottom of the church disappearance. After investigation, there had been no tornado or earthquake that demolished the building. The church officials had no evidence that space aliens were to blame for the missing structure. What they found was that the perpetrators were villagers from the town, who had taken and sold bricks from the building to a businessman. For each brick, the thieves received one ruble (about 4 cents).

This two-story brick church did not go from being a building to nothing in one bulldozing stroke. The bricks were apparently chiseled out one by one by lots of people over several years. One by one, brick by brick, the church had been demolished until it was no more.¹

That's a parable for our faith, isn't it? The trajectory of all matter is toward what physicists call entropy, a gradual descent into disorder. Unless energy that produces order is injected into a system, it will proceed toward chaos. The human tendency, too, is to fall apart, brick by brick. We get lazy; we fall out of good habits all too easily. We used to be in a Bible study, but we just got busy, and now our Bible has a coat of dust on our coffee table. We decide to get a few more winks and forget to pray, until God is a stranger. We find fun stuff to do on the weekends, and soon it's been months since we were in church. We become content to let someone else expend the energy with Sunday School or children

or youth or inviting people to church. Then suddenly we look up one day and the church we knew and loved is no more.

Entropy, the gradual descent into disorder, is not your best life. It is not how God created us to be. I listen regularly to a podcast called “No Small Endeavor,” hosted by a professor of Christian ethics named Lee C. Camp. The tagline of the podcast is “exploring what it means to live a good life.” Camp asks the questions, “What does it mean to live a good life? What is true happiness? What are the habits, practices, and dispositions that contribute to authentic human flourishing?”² Those are great questions.

In his conversations with theologians, psychologists, artists, writers, and musicians, one phrase that often comes up is “paying attention.” Paying attention leads to a better life. It means noticing the needs and opportunities around you. It means making decisions that are consistent with your values. It means acting with intentionality in daily life. It means acknowledging that there is something greater in life that we’re striving toward—whether you call that God, the universe, the spirit, or whatever.

This week, the poet Naomi Shihab Nye said that paying attention for her meant practices of daily living. Writing, she said, is a matter of “research and ritual.” What a great description of the Christian life! We are always researching, learning more about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Disciple means learner; discipleship is the process of learning more about following Jesus. Discipline (same root word) is coupled with ritual, the ordered practices of the Christian life. The two together tend toward human flourishing. This is how you pay attention in order to live a good life.

John Wesley made sure his Methodist people understood the practices of Christian living. It was not enough for him to blow into town and get people fired up with powerful preaching. He had to give them a rule of life that would sustain them against the forces of disorder and chaos. Within a year of his Aldersgate experience, people were coming to Wesley for instructions on how to live a Christian life. They began to meet on Thursday evenings, and Wesley called this group a “society.” The entrance requirements for a Methodist society were “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.”³ He gave the societies three General Rules to guide their discipleship.

First was, “Do no harm.” Christians are to avoid behaviors that are self-destructive, hurt other people, or destroy God’s world. Wesley’s list, which is still in our Book of Discipline, includes taking the name of the Lord in vain and profaning the Sabbath (which are in the 10 Commandments), but also more contemporary examples like drunkenness, slaveholding, unethical lending or borrowing, wearing fancy clothes and jewelry. You can look them up online or in your bedside Discipline. Today we need to reflect on the ways we can do harm to ourselves—physically, emotionally, spiritually—to others, and to the world. And then don’t do that stuff!

The second General Rule is to “do good.” In Wesley’s words, “By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men.”⁴ Again, he pays attention to Scripture, saying that doing good means feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, sharing the Gospel as we have opportunity. But he also includes helping other Christians with employment or commerce, practicing frugality, being patient in persecution. Doing good can become a long list of positive practices.

The last of the three General Rules, Wesley said, is to “attend upon all the ordinances of God.”⁵ That sounds like a foreign language to us, three centuries removed, so when

Bishop Reuben Job wrote a book about the General Rules a few years ago, he restated the third General Rule as “Stay in love with God.”⁶ These are the practices that keep our relationship with God strong; doing these things is how we pay attention to God in our life. In other places, Wesley called these ordinances of God “means of grace.” In his sermon on “The Means of Grace,” Wesley said, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby [God] might convey to men [prevenient], justifying, and sanctifying grace.”⁷ I try to steer a course between the 18th-century Wesley and the 21st-century Job and state the third General Rule, “Practice the means of grace.”

So what are these means of grace? Wesley gave a list; others have added to or subtracted from that list. Basically, a means of grace is any way God communicates grace to you and anything you do to strengthen your relationship with God. A means of grace can be as simple as silence and breathing, or a view of nature, or a song. But there are several practices that are guaranteed to put you in a position to receive the grace of God at whatever stage you need it—prevenient, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

The first is prayer. Turning our hearts and minds to God opens us up to receive. There are many ways to pray—using prayer books, praying Scripture, talking to God like a friend, giving God a list to work on, being silent. Wesley also included family prayer, which is so meaningful if you can actually pull it off. To experience grace, pray.

The second is “searching Scripture.” (Wesley’s words) Read the Bible. Study the Bible. Study the Bible in a group. You will strengthen your relationship with God.

The third is worship. Corporate worship, the gathering of people of faith, is a fundamental practice of Christianity. Worship also includes the grace that comes when we celebrate the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Last week I shared the Wesley quote, “The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁸ Christianity is a group exercise. God gave us a Sabbath; our ancestors gave us a church; there’s no excuse not to be here every time you can. And if you’re prevented from coming in person (And some are, for health reasons, and nobody is in town every weekend.), there’s still no excuse, because our services are on the internet for you to watch from now till Kingdom come. Worship attendance has been a struggle for many years, and especially since the pandemic. Still, worship is a means of grace that helps us pay attention.

The fourth means of grace is Christian friendship. Wesley called this “Christian conferencing.”⁹ Or you could say fellowship. This can be as complicated as the rules for a group to discern a path forward, as it has been used even at our General Conference, or it can be as simple as talking about your faith with a friend over coffee. Conversations between people about spiritual matters can be enlightening and a way God works to strengthen our relationship. As many have said, “Conversation is the currency of change.” Practicing Christian friendship can make a graceful change in us.

Fifth on the list is giving. God makes it clear all through Scripture that we are to give a proportion of our income to support the Kingdom work of the church. In Biblical times, it was sheep and grain given to the priests at the Temple. Today giving involves making decisions about how much of your family income goes to God first. The goal and the Biblical rule is the tithe (10%), but wherever your giving is, the stronger it is, the more it will strengthen your relationship with God and the church. You invest in what’s important, and the more you invest, the more important it becomes.

The sixth means of grace is service. Another phrase of Wesley's, though borrowed, was "an outward sign of an inward grace."¹⁰ When we give ourselves to serve others, it is an outward sign that God is working in us. Wesley calls these acts of mercy. When you do good to people, that is an extension of the mercy of God. When you serve the church in any sort of ministry, it is a way God empowers us to do God's work. When you serve outside the church in the community, it is a witness to the love and mercy of Jesus. Serving is a means of grace.

And finally, the biblically significant number seven: witness. Sharing your faith in public is a means of grace. Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, and we can't do that unless we tell people about Jesus. It's not just the preacher's job. Our witness can be our actions or our words or both, but when we do it, the Kingdom is increased, God is glorified, and we are given the courage and boldness of grace.

So those are seven of the many means of grace, and I could do a sermon on each of them—oh, wait, I have! All of these and all of the others are ways that we grow in grace, gifts given to us by our loving heavenly Father. This is our trajectory away from spiritual entropy and toward holiness. As Paul said, "*Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*"¹¹ Discipleship is growing in grace and love.

The power of discipleship comes from the practice of Christian people like you. I was amused a few months ago when a church member shared an article about a church down in east Texas that was experiencing remarkable renewal. It seems that a handful of lay people—not the preacher—got a fire in their belly to renew their church after all the denominational turmoil. So they got a group together and studied Will Willimon's book *Don't Look Back*,¹² about the future of The United Methodist Church. Then they started a congregation-wide study of Adam Hamilton's book *The Walk*.¹³ The church adopted the five discipleship practices in *The Walk*, and started teaching and promoting them. Suddenly, church attendance increased and study groups were full and young people were coming out of the woodwork.¹⁴ My friend said, "We ought to do something like that here!" He is one of my best church members, here all the time, but I had to inform him that in the last two years, I had done a sermon series on both of those books that had ignited the ministry in east Texas, apparently to little effect. But that conversation only makes the point stronger. It's not the preaching that sets a church on fire; it's the practice of the people who are on fire to be disciples.

Let me close with a story I often share with our confirmation classes. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the great spiritual leaders of the 20th century. He once said something very profound about the meaning of our lives. In December of 1972, shortly before Heschel's death, Carl Stern of NBC interviewed him for the TV program "Eternal Light." His last question was, "What message do you have for young people?"

Rabbi Heschel responded, "I would say: let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can—every one—do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art."¹⁵

Another time Rabbi Heschel was talking about life as a work of art, and he said, “A work of art introduces us to emotions which we have never cherished before. Great works produce rather than satisfy needs by giving the world fresh cravings.”

I pray that each of you will build your life as if it were a work of art. May God give you fresh cravings to be a disciple of Jesus. Pay attention. Practice the means of grace. After I am gone, don’t forget the path of discipleship.

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¹ “Russian Orthodox church stolen--brick by brick,” *Associated Press*, November 13, 2008.

² Lee C. Camp, *No Small Endeavor*, available on your podcast app.

³ <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church>.

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), p. 79

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Reuben P. Job, *Three Simple Rules; A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007) 51ff.

⁷ John Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” *The Works of John Wesley, Third Edition*, Volume 5 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 187.

⁸ John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.

⁹ Henry Rack, Randy Mattox, William Lawrence, *Wesley Works, Volume 10* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 856-857.

¹⁰ Wesley, “The Means of Grace.”

¹¹ Ephesians 4:15-16.

¹² William Willimon, *Don’t Look Back; Methodist Hope For What Comes Next* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2022.)

¹³ Adam Hamilton, *The Walk; Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2019).

¹⁴ <https://www.txcumc.org/news/nacogdoches-laity-ignite-discipleship-and-outreach/>.

¹⁵ https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5545.Abraham_Joshua_Heschel. See the interview on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEXK9xcRCho>.