

Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace

Sustaining Grace

- **Pardon and power.**

Philippians 2:12b-13; Romans 7:24b-25a, 8:2

- **Progress and perfection.**

Galatians 5:22-23; 2 Corinthians 13:5-9

- **Participation and pathways of grace.**

Hebrews 12:11; Ezra 7:10

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Michael O'Neill

Way Truth Life: A Journey of Grace¹ Sustaining Grace

I came across this vinyl record album last weekend at the youth rummage sale; maybe one of you donated it with a box of records? (Does everyone know what a record album is?) It's an album from the 1960's by a singer named Peggy Lee. When I saw it, I had to get it, because believe it or not, it has played a significant role in my Christian life. God used this as a *means of grace* in my life. A *means of grace* is a way or a method that God uses to communicate or reveal himself and his grace to us in our lives.

So when I was a kid, each summer for several years, I would go camping with a good friend of mine and his family, and he would come with me and my family. When I went with him, we would camp on Friday Harbor in the San Juan Islands. And on the way, we would stop at his grandmother's house on Vashon Island. One time when we were there, I noticed that his grandmother had an old Victrola record player. I was curious how it worked, and it had a record on the turntable already, so I cranked it up and placed the needle on the record to see how it worked. The album on the record was this one by Peggy Lee, and the song that played was the song, "Is That All There Is?" I had never heard the song before – it had come out many years before that. But the song is about a person who, when she was a little girl, watched her house burn down, then later in life she experienced the loss of love, and then later in life considered taking her own life. And in each instance, the chorus says this: "Is that all there is? If that's all there is, my friend, then let's keep dancing. Let's break out the booze and have a ball."

I can remember that vividly. As I listened to the music, I forgot all about the record player and I was just struck by those lyrics. I remember thinking, "Is that *really* all there is to this life? That can't be true; there must be more to this life!" I was maybe fourteen years old. God used that song over the next few years, as the Holy Spirit kept saying to me, "God has more for your life than this, Mike." Remember, I wasn't raised in a Christian or religious home. I didn't have any frame of reference for that message. But God used that song as a *means of grace* to draw me into this life that I could have with him – a life of so much more! I began to realize there IS more, and I became a Christian at the age of 17. Then, after that, I began to experience that wrestling match between my sin nature and God's Spirit, like we talked about last week. And again, those words came back to me as God spoke to me – "There is more for your life than this, Mike. I want you to be free from this struggle with sin so that you can live abundantly and make a difference in this world for my Kingdom."

Isn't it crazy that God, in his love and seeking grace for me – an insignificant, irreligious, unchurched 14-year-old adolescent – that God would use an old record album to get my attention and let me know that he loved me and had a much better, greater life for me!

¹ This series borrows heavily from, and is indebted to:

- David A. Busic, *Way, Truth, Life: Discipleship as a Journey of Grace* (The Foundry Publishing, KC, MO 2021)

We've been in this series describing our journey of grace, learning, and leaning in to all the ways that we experience God's grace in our lives. We've talked about God's *seeking grace* – that God, in his great love for us, seeks us while we are still dead in our sins and hostile to Him in our hearts and thoughts and actions. But because of his seeking grace, he actually makes us aware of how much we need him so that we can respond to his grace given to us through what Jesus did for us by dying on the cross in our place. When we do respond, we experience God's *saving grace*. God forgives us of all of our sin and establishes us in a right relationship with him as our Father, and he miraculously and supernaturally makes us alive in our spirit so that we are literally a new creation in him, with a new, abundant, and eternal life ahead of us. The Holy Spirit, who previously worked outside of us, awakening us to our need for God, is now able to work inside of us, changing us from the inside out. We have begun the grace journey of becoming all who God originally created and intended us to be – to be like Christ in every way: in our love for others, in our joy and peace, in our thoughts and in our emotions and in our choices. The Holy Spirit begins to clean and correct us in this process that is called “sanctification,” or holiness, or Christlikeness. But in this process, we begin to realize how much of a foothold sin still has in our lives. We experience this inner wrestling match between our sinful desires, or our sin nature, and what God wants for us through the Holy Spirit. And of course God, as our loving Father, always wants what's best for us. So we begin to struggle with this “holy dissatisfaction,” and we either give up and never grow up, remaining in that struggle, or we give up and surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit and allow him to now rule, reign, and lead in our lives in all things. This process is what we described last week when we talked about *sanctifying grace*. God really, really does have more for you! You do not have to settle for the struggle. So if you remember from last week, I said that when we surrender and allow the Holy Spirit to fill us, the life of Christ can be lived out in us; we can be free from sin because the power of the Holy Spirit in us is stronger than the power or pull of sin in our lives.

You may have listened last week and thought to yourself, is Pastor Mike saying that if we are sanctified that means we will never sin again? Listen carefully: while we *can* live free from sin, it does not mean we are perfect, or without faults, or not going to make mistakes, nor does it mean that we can't sometimes sin in a moment of weakness or spiritual vulnerability. In the Holy Spirit, we don't have to keep giving in to sin, even though there might be times when we do. But sin doesn't have to be the norm; once we've surrendered, it is different now than it was before, when we were in that constant wrestling match. Instead of constantly doing this (*show up and back zig zag*), it can be like this (*show a steady trajectory*). But we are not without our human frailty, weaknesses, or mistakes, and we never lose our sin nature (not this side of heaven, anyway). But, we no longer have to be a slave to our sin nature. Instead, in the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 6:18...

“You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”
(Romans 6:18, niv)

So as we experience God's sanctifying grace, we find that the strength we need to continue to live the holy life is given to us in God's *sustaining grace* – that's what we're looking at today. The grace of God that seeks us, saves us. And the grace of God that saves us, sanctifies us. And the grace of God that sanctifies us, also sustains us. So we experience

both God's...

- ***pardon and power.***

We experience God's love and forgiveness, while at the same time his power to say no to sin. So now we need to do the work of growing in our relationship with Christ, growing to maturity, doing the things we need to do to get better and better at this holy life, this Christ-like life. That's why the Bible says:

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12b-13, niv)

What that means is that God is giving you both the *desire* to be like Jesus and the *ability* to be like Jesus as you live in both his pardon and his power in your life.

Let me put it this way: God loves you right now, just the way you are. But God also loves you too much to leave you the way you are. We receive both God's love as well as his expectations for holiness. If all we received was God's love and forgiveness without holiness, we could keep on living however we wanted to, and God would just have to keep forgiving us. That is cheap grace. If we think love covers all so we can just keep on sinning, that is a weak, pathetic, powerless love. But on the other hand, if all we received was God's expectations of holiness without his love, we would never be good enough; we could never measure up. We would always be under the burden of guilt. We need *both* of God's pardon and power, we need love and holiness. Love without holiness is permissive; holiness without love is harsh.²

I'll say it again: it *is* possible to be holy. It *is* possible to be like Jesus. That's exactly why the Paul wrote this in Romans:

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!... through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.
(Romans 7:25; 8:2, niv)

Do you see that? The law, or the rule, of the Spirit of God really can give us a life set FREE from the law, or the rule, of constantly struggling with sin and death.

In God's pardon, our record is clean, and God considers us as if we have never sinned; we are "justified," which means "just as if" we've never sinned. That is our new position with God. But we also need God's power in order to help us actually live out that sin-free life. We are told again and again in the Bible that we must make every effort to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in our lives (Luke 13:24; Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Timothy 2:15; Hebrews 12:14; 2 Peter 1:5-7; 3:13-34).

So once we've surrendered to the Holy Spirit and allowed him to fill us as much as we know how at that moment, we can live in this constant state of both...

² Busic, 112

- ***progress*** and ***perfection***.

What God does in our lives, we must work out from our lives. We begin to see the results, or the fruit, in our lives in our thoughts and our actions that are of the Holy Spirit, not ourselves. The Bible says:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23, niv)

When the fruit of the Spirit is evident in your life, the law doesn't apply to you, because you are automatically living out the expectations of the law.

But you might think, "I thought you said earlier that we can't be perfect." I did! But it depends on what definition of "perfect" you are using (this is key!). When the Bible refers to God as perfect, it means *absolute* perfection; God is perfect in every way, not a single flaw, not a single thing is unknown to God, there is no way that God can "improve" because he is absolutely perfect. But when the Bible talks about *our* perfection, it does not mean "absolute perfection;" it means we can be *complete*; we can be as mature as we can be at that given moment. It doesn't mean we don't grow. It doesn't mean we aren't going to get tired or weak or make mistakes. We would have to be absolutely perfect for that to happen, and only God is that. There is nothing more for God to learn or grow in. But, we *can* be complete – as mature as possible in the moment and still growing. Perfect.

Let me explain it this way: when I surrender to the Holy Spirit, then I am committing everything I currently am to him – my intentions, my actions, my life. Everything I know up to now, and my future, even though I don't know it yet. (*Lift one hand up. Then, both hands to an equal level.*) Now God is in me by His Spirit, and he is teaching me where I need to grow. So he's raising the expectation. Now, I've already surrendered to him, right? So the decision to obey him all the time was already made. So I don't have to wrestle with this. The Spirit is giving me both the desire and the ability to obey (remember Philippians 2:12-13). So I obey. From here up, I'm imperfect. But from here down, I am perfect – complete. So the Spirit shows me this, and I obey, and I've grown that much. If I didn't obey, that would be sin. But now, by God's sustaining grace, my life is one of progress and perfection – both. It's my job to continually allow my life to be open to the Spirit, checking myself in all things against what he wants for me. That's why the Bible instructs is to:

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves." (2 Corinthians 13:5a, niv)

I like how Eugene Peterson states this passage in his Bible paraphrase called "The Message":

Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it. (2 Corinthians 13:5-9, tmt)

So we must live this life of self-examine and surrender. The sanctified life or the Christ-like life is a life of both...

- ***participation*** and ***pathways*** of grace.

If you and I are going to get serious about this life, we must be disciplined and submit to God's discipline of us. It takes discipline – both our own continual practice of the godly life as well as accepting God's discipline of us. And that's not always a pleasant thing. The author of Hebrews in the Bible writes:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of *righteousness* and peace for those who have been *trained* by it.
(Hebrews 12:11, *niv italics added*)

Righteousness – holiness or sanctification, and *trained* – practicing it. That's God's discipline. Discipline is a good thing if it serves to teach us and train us. But discipline is a negative thing if it involves punishment for doing wrong. Before you became a Christian, punishment was what awaited you. Now that you are a Christian, discipline is what God in his sustaining grace provides for you.

Put it this way – parents, let me ask you: do your children like it when you discipline them? I mean, no one likes punishment. But do they enjoy it when you discipline them to train them or teach them? Nope. No child is happy when you tell them that they will not be allowed to eat ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No child likes it when you won't let them stay up until midnight watching Netflix on a school night. But why do you discipline them like that? To protect them and to train them to know right from wrong, correct? To love a child includes discipline.

It's not punishment to give a teenager a curfew, even if they feel like it is. It is discipline. God disciplines us because he loves us.

There are ways that God corrects us and teaches us, and there are methods or means that God has given us to grow: reading his Word, his Spirit speaking to our hearts, the Church (worship and small groups and classes and ministry opportunities), prayer, the sacraments like baptism and communion. Those are pathways or means of God's grace to us that we must participate in if you and I are going to be like Christ.

In the Bible class that I teach at 9am on Sunday mornings, we are doing a study in Ezra-Nehemiah from the Old Testament. I love how the Bible describes Ezra:

For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel. (Ezra 7:10, *nrsv*)

There is a great example of holiness: God, in his sustaining grace, sanctifies us and gives us the heart to study the word of God, to practice it, and to share it with others.

The things that we practice are traditionally called spiritual disciplines: prayer, reading the word, fasting, serving, and doing good to others, being generous, introducing others to Jesus and telling them what God has done in your life; worshiping together with your church. Serving together with your church is another spiritual practice to participate in (yesterday at Upward Soccer!). Growing together in small groups and classes.

God in his grace sanctifies us – puts us on the track toward Christ-likeness, and then in his

grace sustains us – gives us the desire and the ability, and the means, to put it into practice.

This is God's grace: it seeks us, saves us, sanctifies us, and then sustains us as we submit and surrender to the Holy Spirit, cooperating and participating with the Spirit as we put into practice the means of grace that God gives us to grow. Friends, there IS more to this life; what you see around you is NOT all there is. God has an amazing, abundant life for you that can be free from the wrestling match against sin, free to fully serve him and by empowered by his Holy Spirit to love and serve others and make a profound difference in this world for Christ.

Prayer

I mentioned that one of those pathways of grace or means of grace in which God reveals himself to us is through sharing together in communion. Communion is a *sacrament* – a sacred moment, a moment of mystery, in which Christ Himself is present among us in a real and profound way. And it is to be shared together as the community, the church, the body. You do not do communion by yourself. Neither are you baptized all by yourself. Both are to be done together as the church. Discipleship may be personal, but it is not private.

The Communion Supper, instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a sacrament, which proclaims His life, His sufferings, His sacrificial death, and resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. It shows forth the Lord's death until His return.

The Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. It is to be received in reverent appreciation and gratefulness for the work of Christ.

All those who are truly repentant, forsaking their sins, and believing in Christ for salvation are invited to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. We come to the table that we may be renewed in life and salvation and be made one by the Spirit.

In unity with the Church, we confess our faith (repeat after me): Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And so we pray:

Holy God,

We gather at this, your table, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who by your Spirit was anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, set at liberty those who are oppressed. Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry, ate with sinners, and established the new covenant for forgiveness of sins. We live in the hope of His coming again.

On the night in which He was betrayed, He took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

Likewise, when the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to His disciples, and said:

"Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me." Through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Matthew 26:27-29, Luke 22:19)

And so, we gather as the Body of Christ to offer ourselves to you in praise and thanksgiving. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on these your gifts. Make them by the power of your Spirit to be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by His blood.

By your Spirit make us one in Christ, one with each other, and one in the ministry of Christ to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

- The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for you, preserve you blameless, unto everlasting life. Eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.
- The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for you, preserve you blameless unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.

Prayer

Let me just encourage you; this experience and process of God's sanctifying grace, setting us free from sin and sustaining us as we grow, is for the long haul. As one person has called it, it is a long obedience in the same direction. And we are in it together; we must be committed to the primary goal of helping each other become like Christ in all things, and showing Christ to our community by the ways we love, serve, and share the Good News with them. Be patient with each other and yourselves. In our instant gratification society, we think we should just suddenly arrive at a place of spiritual maturity, and if we haven't, or if we fail or sin, then we aren't there. But it is a journey of grace. We are sustained by his grace. It is a long haul. Too many times we get the idea that the Christian life is like a pop-tart; just put us in the toaster for two minutes and we should be done. But the Journey of Grace is not a pop tart, we are crock-pot Christians. We are on the slow cook. In the meantime, we can be perfect, complete, as mature as we can be right now, and we will be even more mature tomorrow.

Stand:

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Next week we will learn about God's sufficient grace that strengthens us in our weaknesses.

Go in the Grace of God on your journey through this week.