

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification. We need grace to help us be sanctified, and last week we defined what a means of grace is. How would you like to proceed today Dr. Spencer?

Dr. Spencer: I want to initiate a discussion of what some of the means of grace available to us as Christians are and how to make proper use of them.

Marc Roby: Alright, what *are* the different means of grace? We briefly mentioned a few two sessions ago – you mentioned personal Bible study, prayer and corporate worship as the primary means of grace, but can you give a list?

Dr. Spencer: Well, yes and no. We can certainly list a number of means of grace, and it will be useful to do so, but our list will not be exhaustive, there are far too many ways in which God can impart grace to his people. Nevertheless, the primary means of grace, as we noted two weeks ago, are prayer, personal Bible study and corporate worship. And when I gave that brief list, I intended corporate worship to include the preached Word, but I should have been more explicit about that. James Boice gives a different list of what he calls the primary means of grace, he lists prayer, Bible study and Christian service¹, although he elsewhere adds public worship to that list². In examining the means of grace, I want to address our primary means of communicating with God first, which include both Bible study and prayer.

Marc Roby: Okay. How do you want to approach these?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I first want to note that we are to have a real personal relationship with God. And any real relationship requires two-way communication. We speak to God in prayer, but in addition, we must remember that he knows every thought, word and deed! We can't hide anything from God, our lives are an open book.

But before we discuss our means of communicating with God, I want to talk about how God communicates with us. God speaks to his people in different ways, but the most important is through his written Word, the Bible. In Matthew 4:4 we read that Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."³

Marc Roby: And Jesus was quoting from the Old Testament when he said that.

Dr. Spencer: Yes he was, and it is a very important quotation from the book of Deuteronomy. For our listeners who may not remember, it is important to know that the book of Deuteronomy

¹ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 453

² Ibid, pg. 500

³ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

gives us the addresses that Moses made to the Israelites on the plains of Moab at the end of their forty years of wandering in the desert and just before Moses died and Joshua led the people into the Promised Land.

Marc Roby: Some of our listeners may not know that the name of the book, Deuteronomy, literally means the second law, meaning the repetition of the law.

Dr. Spencer: And that is a very descriptive name for the book. The Israelites who had come out of Egypt all died in the desert for their sin. Every adult male, except for three – Moses, Joshua and Caleb – had died by this point in time. So Moses took this opportunity to tell this next generation about all that had happened and to remind them of the Ten Commandments and all of the ceremonial and sacrificial laws God had given to his people. In Deuteronomy 8:1-3 we read that Moses said, “Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Marc Roby: And God didn't mean that as hyperbole, we really *do* need the Word of God just as we need physical food.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, we absolutely do. Without it, our souls will starve and die. We may be walking around in our physical body, but we will be spiritually dead. We have to remember that when the Bible speaks of life, it doesn't just mean physical life. And death isn't just physical death either. Paul said in Colossians 2:13 that “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.” You can be spiritually dead, but still be quite active in this world. Our physical bodies will die without food and our spirits will die without the Word of God. And therefore, Bible study is absolutely as essential as physical food to the health of a Christian.

Marc Roby: Before we go on, you mentioned a minute ago that the written Word of God, meaning the Bible, is the most important way in which he communicates with his people. Why do you say that?

Dr. Spencer: Because the Bible is the only objective communication from God available to everyone. God *does* speak to us individually in various ways. He plants thoughts in our mind, he brings certain memories to mind, he gives people dreams, he provides insights into different situations and, rarely, he even audibly speaks to people. But because of our sinful nature, any subjective form of communication we think we have received from God is subject to error. We need a solid way of determining whether or not we are right in what we think God has told us.

Marc Roby: And that makes me think of what John wrote. In 1 John 4:1 he commands us, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because

many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Certainly we must be equally as careful any time we think God has spoken to us directly – it could have been another spirit!

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. And it wasn’t a new problem. God dealt with this in the Old Testament as well. In Jeremiah 23:21-22 God speaks to his people about some so-called prophets who have been telling them lies. He said, “I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.” False prophets are virtually always prophets who tell people what they want to hear. They tell us our sins aren’t really that bad, that God isn’t really angry, that we don’t need to repent and change.

Marc Roby: Yes, we all like to be told that we are just fine the way we are.

Dr. Spencer: That’s undeniably true. But the true Word of God always confronts us with our sin and our need to repent and change. It also provides great comfort and encouragement, but it is never complacent about sin or the need for obedience. If you aren’t feeling challenged by the Word of God when you read it or when you hear it preached, then either you or the preacher are not properly understanding and applying that Word. And that is why we need God’s primary means of communicating with us written down. We need to be able to look at it and know for sure what it says and to be able to study it and have others help us understand it. It is far too important to be left to our own subjective ideas and misinterpretations.

Marc Roby: I think that answers the question of why you called the Bible the most important means God has of communicating to us. Now, with reference to Bible study, at the end of our session two weeks ago you noted the importance of reading through the entire Bible over and over again in a systematic way.

Dr. Spencer: And that is just the beginning. It is also important to spend time studying theology, which provides you with the overall structure and help you need to properly understand the Bible. The Bible is a complex book, written over a period of roughly 1,500 years, by many different authors, in cultures very different from our own, in languages most of us are not familiar with. So we need help in properly understanding what it says. And that is why we spent so much time in Sessions 39 through 48 discussing hermeneutics, which is the science of how to properly interpret the Bible.

Marc Roby: And we will never plumb the depths of the riches of God’s Word in this life, no matter how brilliant and educated we are or how hard we study.

Dr. Spencer: No, we won’t. It is an inexhaustible store of good spiritual food to feed God’s people. It is like a great banquet set before you with far too many delicacies to ever be able to try them all. The right response is *not* to say, “Well, I can’t ever eat them all, so I’ll just sit down and not eat at all.” The right response is to dig in and start enjoying the feast!

Marc Roby: I like that approach.

Dr. Spencer: And, for example, listening to these podcasts is a start. But you need to go further. You need to pick up a good systematic theology, we have been using Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*⁴, the most, but we also make frequent use of James Boice's *Foundations of the Christian Faith*⁵, and the *Collected Writings of John Murray*⁶ and a number of others. I strongly encourage our listeners to carefully read through books like that. And when you have finished one, start another. You can check the references online for every podcast. We have used and recommended a number of books over the years.

Marc Roby: I also find it very helpful to remind myself of the historical and geographical context of a given book of the Bible when I'm reading through it.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, I agree completely. A good start there is to read the short introduction to each book in a good study Bible. You don't do this every single day as a part of your reading of course, but it is a good way to spend Sunday afternoons for example, or whenever you start on a new book in the Bible. I would recommend that everyone have a good Bible dictionary and a good Bible atlas available as well. I've got recommendations for all of these things in the footnotes of the transcript for this session.⁷

Marc Roby: Very well. What else would you say about personal Bible study?

Dr. Spencer: I would say that it is essential to approach it properly. The Word of God needs to be treated with respect. There is nothing more important. Pray before you read. Ask God to speak to you by his Spirit through his Word. Don't read quickly. Read slowly and ask questions. Recognize that what you are reading was written at a very different time and in a different culture and, for most Christians, in a different language. Ask God to help you understand it properly and to show you what *you* personally should take away from the reading. Ask him to show you something that will strengthen you for the challenges you will face that very day. You'll be surprised how often something you read in the morning will be applicable to something you deal with that day.

Marc Roby: I've certainly had that happen many times. It strengthens your faith when you see how the Word is useful in a very practical way.

Dr. Spencer: It always amazes me to consider the fact that God knew, before this universe was created, that I would read a particular passage on a particular morning and he knew what would happen later that day, so he draws my attention to a particular aspect of the reading that will equip me in some way to handle that situation. It is amazing when you think about God's infinite wisdom, knowledge and love for his children.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994

⁵ Boice, op. cit.

⁶ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977

⁷ The Zondervan, *New International Bible Dictionary*, Zondervan, 1987 is good, and so is the *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, Revised Edition, Zondervan, 2010, by Carl G. Rasmussen

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful thing to consider. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a classic verse and shows that the Word is given to us for a reason. God does not call us to a life of personal leisure. He calls us to work. And he provides what we need to prepare us for that work. First and foremost, as Paul wrote to Timothy in the verse immediately preceding the ones you just quoted, 2 Timothy 3:15, “the holy Scriptures, ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”

Marc Roby: That is the most important thing for sure. We are told in Hebrews 11:6 that “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” What else would you like to say about Bible study?

Dr. Spencer: Just three more things. The first thing I want to add is that we must be born again to truly understand God’s Word. But I need to explain myself a little here. It is certainly true that some theologians are not true Christians. So I’m not saying that an unbeliever can’t study and learn the original languages, history and culture and become an expert in what the Bible says. What I’m saying is that such a person will never understand the Bible correctly. A correct understanding always goes hand-in-hand with being born again. 1 Corinthians 2:14 tells us that “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Marc Roby: I know that we have made that important point before, but it certainly bears repeating. What is the second thing you wanted to say?

Dr. Spencer: That we must study the Bible obediently. For example, Luke tells us about a woman who was listening to Christ speak. In Luke 11:27-28 we read, “As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, ‘Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.’ He replied, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’”

Now, if we want to be blessed by our reading of God’s Word, we must not be among those who just hear the Word, we must be among those who hear and obey.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of what our Lord’s brother James wrote. In James 1:22 he tells us, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

Dr. Spencer: James Boice also lists obedient study as necessary for proper Bible study and he quotes from Rueben Torrey, who wrote that we should, “Cultivate prompt, exact, unquestioning, joyous obedience to every command that it is evident from its context applies to you. Be on the lookout for new orders from your King. Blessing lies in the direction of obedience to them. God’s commands are but signboards that mark the road to present success and blessedness and to eternal glory.”⁸

⁸ Boice, op. cit., pg. 499

Marc Roby: That's a great quote. We want to get onto and stay on the road to blessedness and eternal glory. And Jesus said, as we read in Matthew 7:13-14, "wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Dr. Spencer: And the way to get on and stay on that road is to know, believe and obey the Word of God. Faithful, persevering obedience is the sign that we are saved. Jesus warned against having only a theoretical knowledge of the Word. In John 5:39-40 we read that he warned his listeners, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." It is entirely possible to diligently study the Bible and still miss the main point.

Marc Roby: And the main point, as you called it, is that Jesus Christ is Lord and we must surrender fully to him, trust him, and obey him in order to be saved. In Hebrews 5:9 we are told that once Jesus Christ had been made perfect through his obedient suffering, "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him".

Dr. Spencer: And in the doxology at the end of the book of Romans, Paul told us the purpose of God's written revelation. He wrote, in Romans 16:25-27, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen." Note carefully what Paul said, Jesus Christ has been revealed and made known *through the prophetic writings*, in other words through the Bible, *so that* – and here is the purpose of this revelation – *so that* all nations might believe and obey him.

Marc Roby: And that reminds me of what the apostle John wrote near the end of his gospel. In John 20:31 we read, "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

Dr. Spencer: And that is my hope for every single one of our listeners. That they will have eternal life in Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: Well, I think that this a great place to finish for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer you.