

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 and, more particularly, the means of grace. In our last session we finished our discussion of prayer and ended with a brief review of what we have covered. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to continue with looking at the means of grace. At the end of last week we said that the primary means of grace are prayer, personal Bible study and corporate worship, which includes the preaching of the Word. I would like to start looking at corporate worship today. But before we begin, it is probably a good idea to remind our listeners of what, exactly, is meant by grace.

Marc Roby: Well, it is often defined as God's unmerited favor, or as his blessings granted to those who deserve his punishment.

Dr. Spencer: And those are both good definitions. But let me quote what I've said before¹ because it is important and we all need repetition in order to keep things in mind. The great 20th-century theologian Louis Berkhof wrote that most commonly, grace "signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. ... it is in reality the active communication of divine blessings by the inworking of the Holy Spirit."² Therefore, we could say that the grace of God is the source of a Christian's power to overcome sin, Satan and the world, and to live a victorious Christian life that is pleasing to God. Grace gives us real power. God's favor isn't just a good feeling or a nod of approval, it confers power to put sin to death and to do the work that God has ordained for us to do.

Marc Roby: In that you are, of course, alluding to Ephesians 2:10, where we are told that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."³ Or, as it says in the King James Version, God *ordained* these works for us to *walk* in them.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I was referring to that verse. The whole purpose of life is to glorify God, and we do that through the obedience of faith. In John 17:4 Jesus said, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." And we glorify God in the same way. We made this point a few weeks ago, but it bears repeating here because we can only do the work that God has ordained, or prepared, for us to do by grace.

Marc Roby: And we read in 2 Corinthians 9:8 that "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."

¹ See Sessions 15 and 190.

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 427

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Dr. Spencer: Yes. And he promises to give us that grace if we are walking in obedience and seek it. In Luke 11:13 Jesus himself told his disciples, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” And remember Berkhof’s statement – grace comes by the inworking of the Holy Spirit. We must realize our need for power from God and then actively seek it. We must ask God for the Holy Spirit and for all necessary grace.

Marc Roby: And that requires humility to see our need. But in James 4:6 we are told that God “gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”

Dr. Spencer: Which is quoting from Proverbs 3:34, which says, “He mocks proud mockers but gives grace to the humble.” And the writer to Hebrews tells us, in Hebrews 4:16, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” We need to come to the throne of grace and ask.

Marc Roby: And that verse is a conclusion drawn by the writer based on the fact that Jesus Christ was tempted as we are, but was without sin. Jesus was full of grace in part because he was always praying. And the same power is available to us to enable us to walk in holiness.

Dr. Spencer: And, as I said, grace is real power. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:10 that “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder”. And in 1 Corinthians 15:10 he wrote that “by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” And he commanded his helper Timothy, in 2 Timothy 2:1, “You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.”

Marc Roby: Well, the message is quite clear. God’s grace gives us power to do the work that he has called us to do.

Dr. Spencer: And every member of the church has gifts, which are to be used for the good of the church. And God’s grace also comes to us through these actions of other believers. We are told in 1 Peter 4:10 that “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.” Therefore, we are also sources of grace to others when we faithfully use the gifts God has given to us.

Marc Roby: Well, I think we have clearly established what grace is and why we need it. And you have said that corporate worship, by which I assume you mean worship done with other Christians, is one of the primary means of grace. What else do you want to say about it?

Dr. Spencer: First of all, I want to say that our attitude toward worship must be right. Worship should be a great joy, but it is also an awesome responsibility and privilege and we must be serious about it.

In the book of Revelation we read about the visions given to the apostle John when he was exiled on the island of Patmos. In this book we are given a glimpse into the very throne room of God. The language is, of course, very symbolic, but some things are perfectly clear. We first see this

throne room in Chapter Four and the vision is majestic to say the least. There are twenty-four elders present along with the seven spirits of God and four living creatures. And what are these creatures doing?

Marc Roby: They are worshipping God, who is on the throne.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We read in Revelation 4:8 that “Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under his wings. Day and night they never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.’”

Marc Roby: That is a marvelous image, which immediately reminds us of the vision given to Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:1-3 we are told, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’”

Dr. Spencer: In both of these visions the creatures are worshipping God. He is called “holy, holy, holy”. This is the only one of God’s attributes ever given a three-fold repetition in the Bible. In our modern culture this would be like putting the word in bold, underlined, italic typeface. It emphasizes the Creator/creature distinction. God is on the throne, not man. And God alone is to be worshiped. The description in Revelation goes on and we are told that the twenty-four elders fall down and prostrate themselves before the throne and, in Verse 11 we are told that they say, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.”

Marc Roby: And God is uniquely worthy of all praise. In fact, the English word worship comes from an Old English word meaning to be worthy.⁴

Dr. Spencer: And the Greek word used in this verse is προσκυνέω (proskuneō), which means to prostrate oneself in reverence. This is the most common Greek word used for worship in the New Testament.

But the point I want to make from all of this is simply that the main function of those who are in heaven is to worship God. We aren’t given many details about how we will spend our time in heaven, but worshipping God is surely the primary activity independent of the form it takes.

Marc Roby: In fact, even here and now we are to worship with all of life. Romans 12:1 tells us, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.”

⁴ e.g., see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/worship>, or <https://eklesiakoinonia.wordpress.com/2012/12/27/worship-etymology/>

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's a great point. All of life is to be worship, which is why Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

But in speaking about corporate worship, we are speaking about a more focused effort. While it is true that I glorify God by getting up in the morning and going into work and doing the best job I can, and that can certainly be called worship in an indirect sense, it is worship through obedience to his commands. But in corporate worship we are to be focused on worshipping God directly. And I have two important points that I want to highlight by this discussion. The first is that if we don't enjoy worship here in this life, we would not enjoy it in heaven either, which is a good sign that we won't *be* in heaven. In other words, being cold to worship here is an indication that we may not be born again.

Marc Roby: That is a terrifying thought given that the only eternal destiny outside of heaven is hell. What is the second point you want to make?

Dr. Spencer: That we must take worship seriously. We are, at least figuratively, to fall down and prostrate ourselves in reverence to God. He is holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come, the whole earth is filled with his glory! We are told in Psalm 96:9 to, "Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth." God is holy and we must be holy to worship him.

We dare not worship him in a half-hearted, overly familiar way. I'm afraid that much of what gets called worship in churches today is actually an abomination in God's sight. I'm not saying we can't be joyful and exuberant, we most certainly should be. But we dare not be flippant and casual.

Marc Roby: Yes, there are a number of Old Testament examples of God taking serious action when people approached him to worship improperly.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there are. For example, in Leviticus 10:1-2 we read that "Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD."

Marc Roby: That is swift and severe punishment indeed.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. We aren't told exactly what they did that made their offering unauthorized. If you read further in that chapter, specifically Verse 8, it appears they may have been drunk, but others think they used an unauthorized formula for the incense they burned.⁵ In either case however, the point is that they did not come before God with reverential fear, being very careful to worship him in the way that *he* says is acceptable. John Frame states the problem

⁵ See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, P&R Publishing Company, 2008, pg. 469

well. He wrote that “Contrary to our usual modern way of thinking, God is not always pleased when people decide to worship him. God takes false worship very seriously.”⁶

Marc Roby: And we tend to think that if something is modern it is automatically better.

Dr. Spencer: And, if you’ll pardon the pun, that is a modern tendency, yes. And I don’t use the adjective modern in a good sense here. It is true that the newest cell phones and television sets are much better than the older ones, but modern is not always better. Especially when it comes to the really important things in life. For example, God established and regulates marriage and family relations and he gave us the Ten Commandments. These things cannot be improved upon. Nor can God’s plans for worship.

Marc Roby: That reminds me of Jeremiah 6:16, where we read, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is good counsel. God doesn’t change. We must worship him the way he has commanded. Frame goes on to give other biblical examples of people suffering severe penalties for defective worship. But I just want to take time to look at one more Old Testament example. One of the kings of Judah, Uzziah, took it upon himself to enter the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar, which only priests were allowed to do.

Marc Roby: And that didn’t go very well for him. Some of the priests displayed great courage by following him into the temple and rebuking him. We read in 2 Chronicles 26:19-20 that “Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD’s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that again was severe judgment. But before we leave this topic, and just in case someone might think it was only in the Old Testament that God was so severe, let’s take a quick look at 1 Corinthians 11:29-30.

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about not being careful when taking communion. He said, “anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.” Now, fallen asleep is, obviously, a euphemism for dying. And note that Paul doesn’t say that one or two of them have been weak, or sick, or died, he says that *many* among them have!

Marc Roby: That should cause people to be far more careful in taking communion.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should. We are told in Galatians 6:7 that “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” Paul doesn’t say that all of those who were sick or died were not believers, so I think it is reasonable to say that at least some of them were. And if they were, then we know

⁶ Ibid, pg. 468

they went to heaven. But God punished them for their sin nonetheless. Our sin will always bring us and our family, friends and church trouble in this life. And being careless about worship is sin.

Marc Roby: I think it troubles many modern Christians to think of God punishing us.

Dr. Spencer: Well, there are different kinds of punishment and perhaps it would be more accurate to say discipline. Jesus bore the wrath of God on our behalf, so we will never experience the punishment of God in that sense. But God does punish his people in this life in the sense of disciplining them and part of the process of sanctification is to properly respond to trials that God brings. We are told in Hebrews 12:10 that “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”

Marc Roby: And we have been, in essence, making the case that holiness is essential to acceptable worship.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Worship is a means of grace, but if we don’t take it seriously, it can become a means of cursing. God’s blessings do not flow to us automatically for certain activities. Going to church isn’t like putting money into a vending machine. The blessings don’t come out automatically just because we show up.

Marc Roby: That’s a good thing for us all to keep in mind.

Dr. Spencer: It is a very important thing to keep in mind. As God’s redeemed and adopted children, we must strive to live holy lives. We are, after all, called to be conformed to the image of Christ as we read in Romans 8:29. And Christ was holy. He never sinned. We are told in Proverbs 15:8 that “The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.”

Marc Roby: And worship is a form of sacrifice. We are told in Hebrews 13:15, “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.”

Dr. Spencer: Therefore, if we praise God on Sunday and live an unholy life the rest of the week, God does not accept our worship. But even if we live a blameless life during the week, if we come on Sunday without proper reverence or if we try to worship God in ways of which he does not approve, God does not accept that worship either.

Marc Roby: Sobering words. And I think that is a good place to end 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.