

**ROMANS 10:17.** (EHV)

So then, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through the word of Christ.

**Introduction: What do we mean by “means of grace”?**

One of the most distinctive features of confessional Lutheran doctrine is the doctrine of the means of grace. In short, this doctrine says that God communicates and conveys his saving grace through specific means, and through those means alone. This is contrary to some who believe that God gives his grace directly, without means, sorting of zapping faith in Christ into the human heart. The Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace is also contrary to others who believe that there are many other means of grace besides those specifically indicated in Scripture, for example, other written revelations or traditions or visions or dreams or nature or music, or even more extreme means, like hallucinogenic drugs and the like.

Let me illustrate the concept of means. I have a cardboard pipe in my hands. If I put a marble in one end and tip the pipe into my other hand, the cardboard pipe is the *means* by which the marble travels from one hand to another. If someone wants to communicate with you, he cannot simply scrunch his eyes together, grunt, and magically zap the message into your heart. He has to use means—whether it's the means of a phone and software coupled with a wireless signal for a text message or phone call; the means of a screen, a keyboard, and software coupled with an electronic signal for sending an email; or the means of pen, paper, envelope, stamp, and postal service for sending a letter. And all of these methods of communication also require the means of alphabet, language, words, and grammar.

Simply put, a *means* is that through which or by which something is done.

So then, when we speak of the means of grace, we are talking about that through which God gives each of us his saving grace—namely the blessings of forgiveness, faith in Jesus, salvation, eternal life. Though we can certainly speak of gifts like family, sunshine, and rainfall as gifts of God's grace, because they too are undeserved, we are not talking about that grace when we speak of the means of grace, because those gifts don't solve our greatest problem, the problem of sin, or give us eternal life. When we speak of the means of grace, we are only talking about the gifts that God gives by which he blesses and saves us eternally.

We can therefore think of the means of grace as a sort of pipeline, a little bit like this cardboard one. We can picture God up here in heaven, above the pipe, and us down on earth, below the pipe, and the pipe itself as that through which God pours out blessings on us that enable us to live in his favor here, and to live with him forever in heaven.

**What is the means of grace?**

So what is that pipeline? What is the means through which God gives each of us forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus, salvation, and eternal life? When we consult the Scriptures for that answer, we come up with either one answer or three answers, and essentially either one is the same answer.

On the one hand, we could answer it with one word, the *gospel*. The English word *gospel* comes from two Old English words, *good spell*, which meant good news. And that's exactly what the gospel is—good news, the good news about what Jesus Christ has done for us, everything

we've been talking about over the past several weeks—Jesus's holy life lived in our place, Jesus's innocent suffering and death to replace and fulfill the eternal punishment we deserved.

That's what Paul tells us right here. He says that saving faith isn't just zapped into our hearts directly, nor does it just spring spontaneously out of our hearts, nor does it come from our asking for it. Saving faith comes from an outside source, and that source is a message. But it is not just any message; it is the message about Christ, the gospel. Paul also says that same thing earlier in this same letter, when he writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). We also heard it in the Gospel, when Jesus prayed to his Father on behalf of those who were going to believe through the message of the apostles, namely the message about himself, the gospel.

On the other hand, we could also answer the question, "What is the means of grace?" with three words—Word, baptism, and Communion, and by "Word," we of course mean the message about Christ in particular. Even though the Bible never calls these the means of grace in so many words—in fact, the phrase "means of grace" never appears in Scripture—we know that they are the means of grace, because God does say in his Word that these are the three things through which God gives each of us forgiveness of sins, faith in Jesus, salvation, and eternal life. These three are the means of grace precisely because all three are vehicles through which God communicates the gospel, the good news about Jesus. Baptism, Communion, and the Word are just different forms of the same gospel of Jesus.

"Okay," you might say, "I know and believe that those three are the means of grace, but how do we know that these are the *only* means of grace?" We say that they are the only means of grace because they are the only means which God has revealed to us in his Word, and so they are the only means that can give us the certainty of our salvation and eternal life. That is also why God urgently stresses their importance. Right before this verse, Paul asked, "How can they call on the one they have not believed in?" The obvious answer is: They can't. "And how can they believe in the one about whom they have not heard?" They can't. "And how can they hear without a preacher?" They can't. "And how can they preach unless they are sent?" They can't. This is why we send preachers of the gospel out into the world. This is the only way we know of to save people's souls, to send out messengers with the gospel, the means of grace, because that is the only way God has revealed to us.

We will talk more about baptism next week and Communion or the Lord's Supper the week after that. Today we want to focus just on the bare Word of God itself, not joined with anything else like water, bread, or wine.

### **What is the Word of God?**

So what exactly is the word of God? We can speak of the word of God in two ways. We can talk about it *externally*. The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. So we could talk about the word of God in terms of its written Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek characters, syllables, sentences, and so on. And those are extremely important.

Paul wrote to Timothy: "All Scripture"—that is, both the Old Testament and the New Testament—"is God breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The apostle Peter wrote similarly: "No prophecy of Scripture ever had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20–21). Each one of the character strokes

written by Moses for the first five books of the Bible, each word recorded by the prophets, each letter written by the apostles, down to the last dot on the i's and the last cross of the t's, was "inspired" by the Holy Spirit. That is, the Holy Spirit breathed into the writers in such a way that everything they wrote was nothing more and nothing less than what he himself wanted them to write, so that it would be 100% true and without error. And yet the Holy Spirit did this in such a way that the humans were not mere robots. Rather the Holy Spirit used their distinctive experiences and grammar and writing styles to communicate his truth clearly.

Just as your alphabet letters and words are important for communicating what you wish to say, so too the external word of God as it appears in the characters and shapes on the paper and parchment of the original writers was vitally important for communicating what they, and the Holy Spirit, wished to say. That is why our church body considers it so vitally important that each of its pastors be educated in the original languages of the Bible. While other synods and seminaries make study of the original languages optional for their pastors and students, we require that pastoral students already be familiar with Greek and Hebrew before they graduate from college, before they even start their education at the seminary.

But of course the characters and words are not the most important thing, but what they actually communicate is, namely their content, ideas, and meaning. So too we can speak of God's word not only externally, but also *internally* or substantially, namely its meaning. When God tells us not to add to, subtract from, or alter his Word, he is telling us not to add new ideas or subtract from or leave out any of its content or alter its meaning. That is why, for instance, it does not matter whether we say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," or "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name," as long as their meaning is the same and we understand what both of them mean.

And it is in this—the *meaning* of the Bible—that the Bible truly excels. Other so-called holy books may also be beautiful externally. For example, I have read that the Arabic of the Koran is very beautiful and sing-songy and has an almost enchanting effect on Arabic-speaking hearers. But the actual ideas and content and meaning that the Bible communicate are unsurpassed.

Just consider: The books comprising the Bible were written in three different languages by roughly forty authors over a span of some 1,600 years or more in a number of different genres and styles, and the time period they cover spans well over 4,000 years. Yet all of those authors and the books and letters they wrote have the exact same message; none of them pursues his own agenda. Some of them wrote in the period of the Old Testament; they rebuked people for and warned people of their sin, and pointed them ahead to the coming Christ. Some of them wrote in the period of the New Testament; they rebuked people for and warned people of their sin, and pointed them to the Christ who had come. The goal of all of them was to point people to Christ. The prayer of all of them was that people would believe in Christ.

Another way to say it is that there are two main doctrines taught in all God's word—no matter who the author is—namely the law and the gospel. The law shows us our sin, and the gospel shows us our Savior. The law makes impossible demands of us, and the gospel tells us that Jesus has fulfilled those demands for us. The law rebukes, threatens, condemns. The gospel cheers, comforts, and saves. The law forces and coerces. The gospel woos and invites. The law is preached to the unrepentant. The gospel is preached to the repentant.

And we all need to hear both, which is why God gave us both in his Word. If we only had the law, we would either become proud and arrogant or we would despair. If we only had the gospel, we would take God's grace for granted and use it as a license to sin, and thus be condemned. God gives us the law so that we realize we are sick and need a healer. God gives us the gospel so that we know the healer and appreciate and glorify him for his healing work.

If you are wondering whether a particular verse or section of Scripture is law or gospel, ask yourself, "Is this verse or section demanding me to do something? Is it condemning me? Or is it inviting me to believe something? Is it comforting and saving me?" If it is demanding or condemning, then it is law; if it is inviting you to believing something or comforting you or announcing your salvation, then it is gospel.

And it is particularly the gospel—the good news about Jesus—that is the means of grace, the pipeline through which God gives us his eternal blessings.

### **Why is it important to teach and preach God's word purely?**

Do you see why pure doctrine is so important? False doctrine is poison to our souls. It is corrosive to our faith. It is like dirt and grime that clogs the pipe, and as you know, dirt and grime buildup, if not removed, just leads to more dirt and grime buildup, until eventually the pipe is blocked. That is Satan's ultimate goal with false doctrine.

But the Holy Spirit himself is connected to and works through pure doctrine. We heard Jesus pray, "Set them apart by the truth; your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Paul writes to the Corinthians, "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). And he writes to the Thessalonians that the apostles' message did not come to them in word only, but in power and in the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:5). Paul told the Ephesians in his farewell address that he was innocent of the blood of all men, because he had not hesitated to proclaim to them the whole counsel of God, that is, all of God's doctrine, pure and true (Acts 20:26–27). So too, that is the only way I am able to say that I am innocent of any of your blood, namely if I simply pass along the content of all of God's word unaugmented and undiminished and unperverted. For that is God's means of grace. Only by preaching the pure content and meaning of the Bible to you can you and I have the assurance of God's promise in Isaiah that his Word will not return to him empty, but will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it (55:11).

There are so many more comforting and beautiful truths about God's word we could detail, so many more blessings that come through it that we could describe. But rather than detail all of them for you this morning, I encourage you simply to expose yourselves to these blessings by exposing yourselves to God's word. King David said that the man is blessed who meditates on God's word day and night (Psalm 1), and the writer to the Hebrews said that the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating and cleansing the deepest depths of the heart (4:12), and I encourage all of you to experience those blessings with David and the writer to the Hebrews. Do not let God's word touch your ears and heart merely once a week. Read it every morning and every night and meditate on its content all day long.

God's word is God's own means for communicating and conveying his saving grace. Let us make use of that means to his glory and our salvation. Amen.