

OPENING OURSELVES TO GRACE: THE BASICS OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

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Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:29-31

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34-35

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

John 14:15

Christian faith is more than agreeing with a set of doctrines or creeds. It is more than outward appearances, signs, and symbols. It's more than saying "I'm a Christian." Christian faith is ultimately about what is happening on the inside. It is a matter of the heart. It is a heart changed by an encounter with the living God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. The changed heart makes a difference in the way we live our lives in the world. This life begins with forgiveness of our sins. When we acknowledge who we are (sinners in need of forgiveness), we can begin living into the lives God desires for us as his beloved children. With forgiveness comes freedom – from sin and death – so that we can love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love those whom God loves; as God loves them, in Christ. All this is God's gift to the world – grace.

As we live this life, we become channels of grace for the world. As we walk with Christ in the world, he gradually removes the blockages to grace we have built up. As the barriers come down, his grace can flow through us for the world. Walking with Christ in the world changes us from the inside out into the human beings God created us to be. He forms our character into a reflection of his. The goal of this life is to "have the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5). God does this in us as we "work out our salvation" (Philippians 2:13).



Let Us Plead for Faith Alone

(Ephesians 2:8-10)

Let us plead for faith alone,
Faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
Only faith the grace applies.

Active faith that lives within,
Conquers hell and death and sin,
Hallows whom it first made whole,
Forms the Savior in the soul

Charles Wesley, 1740

These lines from Charles Wesley describe the life into which God invites us. Faith is the heart of this life. This understanding of faith is relational. Faith is how we live in and with the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. Such a faith is belief, trust, and hope in God – the God who is revealed in the history of the people of Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the life of the church; the one who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith in this God is a living and active faith that is shown by how we live and love in the world. This faith is a gift from God; it is grace applied to life. Such faith gives freedom to love. As we grow in loving God and those whom God loves, our character is formed more and more into the character of Christ. Active, living, vital faith “forms the Savior in the soul.”

A Prayer of John Wesley:

“O that we may all receive of Christ’s fullness, grace upon grace;
grace to pardon our sins, and subdue our iniquities;
to justify our persons and to sanctify our souls;
and to complete that holy change, that renewal of our hearts,
whereby we may be transformed
into that blessed image wherein thou didst create us.”

In this prayer, John Wesley summarizes the dynamic of grace. Here we see that grace is not static. Rather, grace is dynamic. It moves in, with, through, and for the world for healing leading to wholeness; reconciliation leading to genuine trust, righteousness, and justice. Grace is the love of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ and activated in the Holy Spirit, given to draw and woo the world to God’s self. By grace, God restores individuals and communities to right relationship in order to heal and form the image of Christ – damaged by sin – into wholeness. This is the process of salvation. It is both the forgiveness of sin and healing of broken human lives into wholeness in the likeness of Christ.



Baptismal Covenant Commendation and Welcome

Members of the household of God,
I commend *these persons* to your love and care.
Do all in your power to increase *their* faith,
confirm *their* hope, and perfect *them* in love.

The life of grace God gives is lived with others in God's household (John 15:16; Ephesians 2:19-22). The grace God gives is a responsible grace. It is responsible in two ways. First, as a gift that is offered freely and without price, it must be received and accepted as gift. Because the gift is God's unconditional love and acceptance, God does not impose or force the gift on anyone. We are free to respond with indifference, rejection, or acceptance. Second, if we choose to accept the gift and enter into God's way of life in God's household, with that acceptance comes accountability. As members of God's household, we must live by God's household rules (loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and loving one another as Christ loves). Therefore, we are responsible for one another "for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13). The life that God gives cannot be lived alone. It must be lived in a community (the church) of love and forgiveness in which all are nurtured, challenged, and accountable for growing in love to become fully the human beings God created them to be. In other words, grace equips and empowers each person to "do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope and perfect them in love."

GRACE IS:

Grace is God's unmerited, unconditional love and acceptance freely given to all. This grace is incarnate in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). This grace is free, but it is not cheap. It comes to us at great cost to God: the suffering and death of God's Son on a Roman cross. We must always remember and be reminded that the grace God gives is a costly grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it well when he wrote, "Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of the church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. ... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock. It is costly, because it calls to discipleship; it is grace, because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly, because it costs people their lives; it is grace, because it thereby makes them live (*Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4, pages 43 & 45).

Grace is universal. It is for all of creation. God's gift of life and love is not limited to the church or to human beings. It is for all of the cosmos. In



particular, this gift of freedom and healing is for all people without limit. None are excluded from God's love, compassion, and justice.

Grace is relational. It is given and received through relationship. Faith is God's work in and with human beings that opens the door, welcomes, and sustains them in vital, life-giving relationship. Faith is activated through human relationships of love and acceptance. If you examine your life, it is very likely that you came to faith in Christ because a parent, grandparent, friend, Sunday school teacher, pastor, or another loved you enough to introduce you to God's good news in Jesus.

Grace is relational because God is love. God, in God's self, is a community of divine love: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Grace, therefore, is a reflection of God's character. Human beings, created in the image of this God (Genesis 1:26-27), are created for relationship with God and with one another. The nature of this relationship is the love that flows from God for the world.

Grace is love. This love is most profoundly revealed in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is self-giving, unconditional, and liberating. This love is manifest in forgiveness, healing, wholeness, and transformation. It is God's gift to the world in order to form and restore brokenness to wholeness, the incomplete to completeness, the immature into maturity.

GRACE IS PREVENIENT (THE PORCH)

Grace is working in the world, with, for, and in me before I am aware of God's love and acceptance in Jesus Christ. (See John 1:1-18; 2:1-11; 6:1-14; Mark 2:1-12.) It is like a porch that invites and welcomes me to the door of God's household of faith.

Grace awakens me to who and whose I am. (See Luke 15:17-19.) Grace prepares me to accept God's acceptance in Jesus Christ. Grace gives me the freedom to say "yes" or "no" to God's YES in Jesus Christ (Luke 15:11-13).

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
Let every soul be Jesus' guest.
Ye need not one be left behind,
For God has bid all humankind.

Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed,
Ye restless wanders after rest;
Ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,
In Christ a hearty welcome find.



This is the time, no more delay!
This is the Lord's accepted day.
Come thou, this moment, at his call,
And live for him who died for all.

"Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast" by Charles Wesley (UM Hymnal #339, stanzas 1, 3, 5)

GRACE IS JUSTIFYING (THE DOOR)

The porch brings us to the door of the house. The door is open. Jesus is the door. When we accept his acceptance, we know that our sins are forgiven (Jeremiah 31:34; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 7:36-50; 1 John 1:9). The guilt of sin is removed by his love (Romans 8:1). His grace helps us accept God's acceptance (Luke 15:17). Relationship with God is restored (Romans 3:21-26). There is relational change. Faith becomes real and active (Ephesians 2:8-10).

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood!
Died he for me? who caused his pain!
For me? who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine;
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

"And Can It Be that I Should Gain" by Charles Wesley (UM Hymnal #363, stanzas 1, 4, 5)

GRACE IS SANCTIFYING (ROOMS OF THE HOUSE)

Grace helps us through the door and into the household of God. Christ welcomes us with open arms as family. This grace equips and enables us to live the life of a child of God. Paul describes this process in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." The theological term for this is "regeneration."



Jesus describes it in John 3:3 & 5, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above ... being born of water and Spirit."

This process of new birth, which naturally leads to growth, is called "sanctification." In justification, grace leads us to a relational change with God. At the moment our relationship with God is restored through faith, the Holy Spirit begins working on us from the inside out. There is, by grace, a real change; a change of character and of life that leads us into holiness of heart and life. "By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in [Christ],' ought to walk just as he walked" (1 John 2:5-6). Grace in sanctification sets us free from the power of sin (Romans 8:9-11). We are free so that we can love as Christ loves. As we claim and live into this freedom for loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving those whom God loves as God loves them, our character is formed more and more into the character of Christ. We "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

Christian discipleship is a process and a journey that has a goal and destination. John Wesley often quoted the Apostle Paul to describe the goal: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Our destination is Christ. Our goal is "having the mind of Christ." In other words, grace working by faith leads us to live, serve, pray, and worship in such a way that we cooperate with and participate in God's project of redemption and healing for planet earth. In the process, we become more and more the human beings God created us to be, in Christ. We become so filled with the love of God that there is no longer room for sin and evil to be part of us. John Wesley called this "perfection in love." The writer of 1 John puts it this way: "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:17-19).

Let us plead for faith alone,
Faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
Only faith the grace applies.

Active faith that lives within,
Conquers hell and death and sin,
Hallows whom it first made whole,
Forms the Savior in the soul.

"Let Us Plead for Faith Alone", Charles Wesley (UM Hymnal #385, stanzas 1-2)



THE MEANS OF GRACE

Salvation by grace through faith is a relationship with the living God who is revealed and known in Jesus Christ. Our relationship with God is very much like that which we share with a spouse or a friend. Like your relationship with your spouse or a friend, it must be nurtured. Our relationships are a lot like plants. If we neglect them by failing to water, feed, and weed them, they dry up and, eventually, die and are discarded. In order to grow and thrive, they require regular attention and care. Our relationships require attention and participation. We need to give attention to the person; to his or her identity and character. We need to know our beloved: his/her likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams, gifts and graces. We also need to spend time with the beloved, participating in each other's lives.

We need to attend to our relationship with God in much the same way. We know from the witness of Scripture and in the Baptismal Covenant that God is faithful and patient. God knows us better than we know ourselves. Because God is Spirit, he is always available. We, however, are not always faithful, patient, or available to God. This is why God has provided for us a set of basic practices where God promises to always meet us. These basic practices, known as *the means of grace*, are gifts from God given to help us make time and space for God in our lives. They are where we can regularly make ourselves available to God and to the healing, liberating power of grace.

The means of grace are practices in which we learn the mind of Christ by attending to all of his teachings, summarized in the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all of your strength ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). John Wesley describes these basic Christian practices in his sermon "The Means of Grace:"

"By means of grace I understand outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed for this end--to be the ordinary channels whereby [God] might convey to men [and women] preventing [prevenient], justifying, or sanctifying grace."

He believed practicing the means of grace was essential to the life of Christian discipleship because they lead us to Christ and keep us with him. These basic practices are how Christians open themselves to grace and allow the Holy Spirit to "form the Savior in the soul." This is beautifully summarized by Charles Wesley in a hymn written for the Love Feast:

Plead we thus for faith alone,
Faith which by our works is shown;
God it is who justifies,
Only faith the grace applies,



Active faith that lives within,
Conquers earth, and hell, and sin,
Sanctifies, and makes us whole,
Forms the Saviour in the soul.

In other words, the means of grace are how disciples of Jesus Christ live out “active faith that lives within.” When Christians practice their faith, they make themselves available to God and the power of grace to “conquer ... sin, sanctify, and make them whole.” As these practices and grace become integrated into life, Christians are then free to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love their neighbors as themselves. The more they open themselves to grace, the more free they become to love those whom God loves as God loves.

Attending to our relationship with God through practicing the means of grace does not, however, come naturally. We need to learn how to do these basic practices of discipleship in the same way that a newly married couple must learn how to live together and love each other over many years. In other words, loving is a discipline that must be learned. It is learned over time through discipline and practice with experienced practitioners.

Learning the practice of loving God and loving as God loves is very much like learning to play baseball. First, you cannot do it alone. Baseball is a game that cannot be played alone. It can be played only with a team. Even if all you want to do is play catch, you need at least one other person to play. Because grace is relational, we learn how to love as God loves in the presence of others who have known and loved God longer than we. Second, like all games, there is a set of basic skills that must be learned and practiced in order to begin to play the game. This set of basic skills is universal. All players must learn them: throwing, catching, hitting, running, knowing, and thinking baseball. The basic practices of Christian discipleship are *the means of grace*. They are foundational to Christian faith and life. Third, discipline is essential to growth in grace and love. An athlete who engages in the discipline of baseball (catching, throwing, hitting, running, and knowing and thinking the game) becomes a baseball player. Likewise, a person who engages in the discipline of following Jesus in the world (attending to all of his teachings through works of piety and works of mercy) becomes a Christian disciple.

Learning and practicing the means of grace as part of daily life is how Christians attend to their relationship with God and with those whom God loves (neighbors, other Christians, and selves). They are how God’s grace flows through a human life for the world. In the process, when people open themselves to grace, they open themselves to becoming fully the human beings God created them to be, in Christ.



John Wesley describes this process of “becoming” or Christian character formation in his sermon “On Zeal.” Here he succinctly describes the work of love that forms “holy tempers” in the heart through the means of grace:

In a Christian believer love sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart, and reigns without a rival. In a circle near the throne are all holy tempers: long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, goodness, fidelity, temperance (see Galatians 5:22-23)—and if any other is comprised in 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 2:5). In an exterior circle are all the works of mercy, whether to the souls or bodies of men. By these we exercise all holy tempers; by these we continually improve them, so that all these are real means of grace, although this is not commonly adverted to. Next to these are those that are usually termed works of piety: reading and hearing the Word, public, family, private prayer, receiving the Lord's Supper, fasting or abstinence. Lastly, that his followers may the more effectually provoke one another to love, holy tempers, and good works, our blessed Lord has united them together in one—the church, dispersed all over the earth; a little emblem of which, of the church universal, we have in every particular Christian congregation (Sermon 92: On Zeal, § II.5).

These basic Christian practices and watching over one another in love are how congregations live out the promise to “do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.”

WHAT ARE THE MEANS OF GRACE?

The means of grace (basic Christian practices) are divided into two general categories: *works of piety* and *works of mercy*. Works of piety are practices that help Christians attend to their relationship with God. They are how we grow and mature in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The works of mercy are basic practices Jesus taught his disciples for expressing their love for God in the world through acts of compassion and justice for their neighbors.

The works of piety are prayer, worship, the Lord's Supper, reading and hearing Scripture, mutual accountability and support in small groups (Christian conference), and fasting (or abstinence). These are acts of devotion and acts of worship. They are both public (worship, the Lord's Supper, Christian conference) and private (prayer, studying Scripture, fasting).



The counterpoint for the works of piety are the works of mercy. It's important to understand that the two go hand in hand. They create a life of harmony and balance. For if we are paying attention to God in prayer, worship, and Scripture reading, we will be compelled to service in the world; loving those whom God loves, as God loves them. The works of mercy are derived from Jesus' words in Matthew 25:31-46. In this parable, Jesus tells his disciples, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Therefore, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing those who have no clothes, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners are, according to Jesus, expectations of following him in the world. We can add to this list Jesus' mission of bringing good news to the poor, release to captives, opening the eyes of the blind, and liberation for those who are oppressed. In other words, those who follow Jesus are to be people of God's Jubilee – people of compassion *and* justice (Luke 4:18-19). We are to be citizens of God's reign of righteousness and justice described in Matthew 5:3-12.

Works of Piety

- ◆ Prayer (private & family)
- ◆ Public worship
- ◆ The Lord's Supper
- ◆ Reading & studying Scripture
- ◆ Christian conference
- ◆ Fasting or abstinence

Works of Mercy

- ◆ Feeding the hungry
- ◆ Clothing the naked
- ◆ Caring for the sick
- ◆ Visiting the jails and prisons
- ◆ Sheltering the homeless
- ◆ Welcoming the stranger
- ◆ Peacemaking
- ◆ Acting for the common good

How do we maintain the balance that is so important to growing in love of God *and* neighbor? We need help with this because, left on our own, our practice of the means of grace will gravitate toward those that suit our temperament or personality. For example, an introvert will naturally be drawn to some of the works of piety (private prayer, Bible study, and fasting) and will tend to neglect worship, Christian conference, and most of the works of mercy. On the other hand, an extroverted person will naturally be drawn to those works of piety and mercy that suit his/her temperament but will neglect time alone with God in prayer and reflection. Maintaining balance is essential for Christian formation and faithful discipleship. Attending to *all* the teachings of Jesus, and not just those that suit our temperament, is how grace forms our character and heals our souls. Attending to a balanced discipleship is also how we contribute to building up the body of Christ and equipping one another for ministry in the world (Ephesians 4:12).

Maintaining balance in our discipleship, personal and corporate, leads to transformed lives and congregations. It is how we participate in and cooperate with God's work of healing and forming human lives and communities that are



characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

A RULE OF LIFE

“A *rule of life* is a pattern of spiritual disciplines that provides structure and direction for growth in holiness.... It fosters gifts of the Spirit in personal life and human community, helping to form us into the persons God intends us to be.” (Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, page 138.)

Our United Methodist heritage gives some fruitful help here. In the Class Meetings, the Methodists “watched over one another in love.” Their life together was guided by the *General Rules* given to the United Societies by John Wesley.

The General Rules are simply a Methodist *rule of life*. The General Rules guided the Methodists in their corporate life together and in their personal growth in faith and love.

This Methodist *rule of life* was general because it allowed for the diverse personalities, needs, and spiritual maturity of the members of the class meeting. It was a rule because it was a guide to help the Methodists orient their corporate and individual lives toward Christ and his life in the world. It was like a compass that helps keep a traveler on course to his or her destination. For the Methodists, the destination was holiness of heart and life. They were on a journey together guided by their *rule of life*. Being accountable to and with one another, “watching over one another in love,” helped them make progress along the way.

The General Rules are very simple:

1. Do no harm by avoiding evil of every kind; especially that which is most generally practiced...
2. Do good as often as you can to as many as you can, to their bodies and to their souls ...
3. Practice the means of grace:
 - Private and family prayer
 - Public worship
 - Bible reading and study
 - The Lord’s Supper
 - Fasting or abstinence¹

¹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church - 2004* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 72-74.



This is simple, basic Christianity. The General Rules help people grow in faith and love by following the teachings of Jesus Christ as he summarized them in Matthew 22:34-40 and John 13:34-35. They provide a model of balanced and varied discipleship. The rules help disciples keep a balance of what Wesley called “works of piety” (loving God) and “works of mercy” (loving your neighbor as yourself).

THE GENERAL RULE OF DISCIPLESHIP

To witness to Jesus Christ in the world, and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The General Rule of Discipleship is a concise summary of The General Rules. Its purpose is to guide Christians into a balanced and varied discipleship that is centered in Jesus Christ.

The importance of the General Rule is the balance it maintains among *all* of the teachings of Jesus:

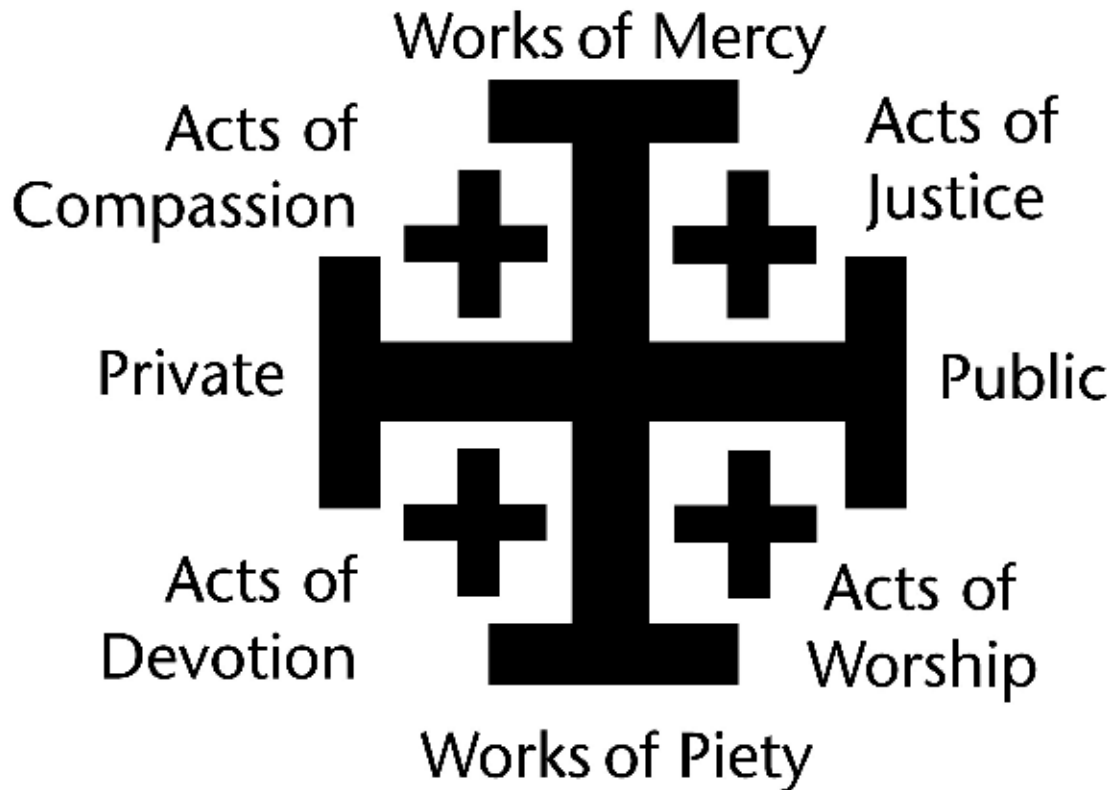
- Private/Personal: Acts of Devotion & Acts of Compassion
- Public/Social: Acts of Worship & Acts of Justice
- Works of Piety (*Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind & strength*)
 - ◆ Acts of Worship
 - ◆ Acts of Devotion
- Works of Mercy (*Loving your neighbor as yourself*)
 - ◆ Acts of Compassion
 - ◆ Acts of Justice

Acts of Compassion are the simple things we do out of kindness to our neighbor. Our neighbor is anyone who is in need, anywhere in the world.

Acts of Justice: We must not only minister to people in need, but also ask why they are in need. In the name of Christ, we must implement God’s righteousness and denounce injustice.

Acts of Worship are the means of grace that we exercise together: the ministries of word and sacrament. They enable us to build one another up in the Body of Christ.

Acts of Devotion are the private spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, fasting, and inward examination that bring us face to face with God.



A GENERAL RULE

The General Rule of Discipleship is just what it says: a **general** rule. It is not meant to be followed to the letter, quite simply because each disciple is a unique person, doing unique things for Christ. You will discover this very quickly in your Covenant Discipleship group, where each member will prove to have distinctive strengths and skills. You will find this to be just as true in the sense of vocation that motivates each of your group members.

These distinctive gifts and graces should be used to the fullest, not least because they will complement and enhance everyone else's strengths and skills. The New Testament image of the Body of Christ is helpful in this regard: Each part of the body contributes to the well-being of the whole, precisely because each part is distinct yet inseparable. So it is with discipleship. Each of us has a unique contribution to make to the whole.

The General Rule of Discipleship is not proscriptive or prescriptive. It is directive, like lines on a piece of paper or a compass; and it is inclusive and liberating.



AVOIDING SELF DECEPTION

However, there is a pitfall to be avoided. If we are not careful, we find ourselves following those teachings of Jesus that suit our temperament and avoiding those that do not; we find ourselves engaged in those aspects of ministry and mission that appeal to us, while neglecting those that do not. The General Rule helps us avoid that pitfall by keeping us mindful of *all* the teachings of Jesus: those that are convenient, as well as those that are not. It ensures that everyone's gifts and graces are recognized and fulfilled. By the same token, it prevents us from deceiving ourselves about what we are and are not doing for Christ.

Far from being restrictive, the General Rule proves to be very liberating. Because it is basic, it is very practicable. It allows everyone to fulfill his or her potential as a Christian disciple without being intimidated by other people's strengths. It helps us avoid self-deception in the Christian life. Most important, it helps us accept other people's discipleship sympathetically and non-judgmentally.

CONCLUSION

The Scripture way of salvation is a process of growth, development, and maturation in faith, hope, and love. It is a way of living that draws us closer to Christ and conforms our lives to Christ's life. A helpful way of visualizing this life comes from a Sixth Century monk, Dorotheos of Gaza:

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. ... Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings. ... Let us assume for the sake of analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God.²

Discipleship, practicing the means of grace, is how we move from the circumference of the circle closer and closer to the center. In the process we grow in love and are drawn closer and closer to our neighbor and to God. Living the General Rules within relationships of mutual accountability and support in

² Roberta C. Bondi. *To Love as God Loves: Conversations with the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 25.



small groups empowers and equips women, men, youth, and children to grow up and grow toward the One who is creating, redeeming, and sustaining them in love.

Small-group ministry must be at the heart of congregations that want to take their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ and discipleship seriously. In order to provide opportunities for adults, youth, and children to grow in holiness of heart and life, a system of small groups for mutual accountability and support for Christian formation must be available. The system should be organized in steps according to levels of Christian maturity. Such a network of small groups needs to reflect a progression of groups developed by Wesley in the early Methodist societies. The goal of such a system is Christian formation, not member formation. Churches that are effective and growing today are those that focus on helping people live as disciples of Jesus Christ. They are not interested in turning visitors into good members to serve on committees and councils. Rather, their goal is to get every member into appropriate small groups that will help him/her encounter Christ and grow in faith, hope, and love. Regardless of size, location, or ethnicity, small groups are the most effective means of inviting people into a relationship with Jesus Christ, forming them as faithful disciples, and sending them into the world to share their faith and to serve.

Wesley was concerned that the Methodists would become societies having the form of godliness without the power. For him, the power of religion was the movement of grace that transforms and heals human hearts and relationships from self-centered existence to Christ-centered abundant, eternal life. He understood that Christian faith is incarnational. Genuine, life-giving faith is a relationship with the God who has come, is coming, and will come again in Jesus Christ. When people gather in the name of Jesus, transforming power is released into the world. Lives are set free from slavery to addictions, violence, abuse, self-centeredness, hopelessness, and despair. He understood through his study of the Bible, the writings of the early church, and personal experience that divine grace flows from God through faithful disciples who regularly gather in the name of Jesus to pray, study, support, and “watch over one another in love.” He also understood that grace is blocked when Christians neglect these means that God has given them.

It is fair to say that most churches want to have the form *and* the power of godliness. Most have the form, which is all the outward and visible symbols, actions, and organizational structures that go with being a church. The power comes from the Holy Spirit that moves through the hearts, minds, and souls of the people in the church when they gather in Jesus’ name to pray, praise, proclaim, give, serve, and watch over one another in love. Churches that have the power are engaged in mission and ministry that is centered on Christ and on witnessing to Christ in the world. Wesley teaches the church today, just as he taught the Methodist societies in eighteenth century England, that organizing

Opening Ourselves to Grace: The Basics of Christian Discipleship



around small groups for Christian formation will go a long way to assure that the power of grace will flow through the church into the world.



God

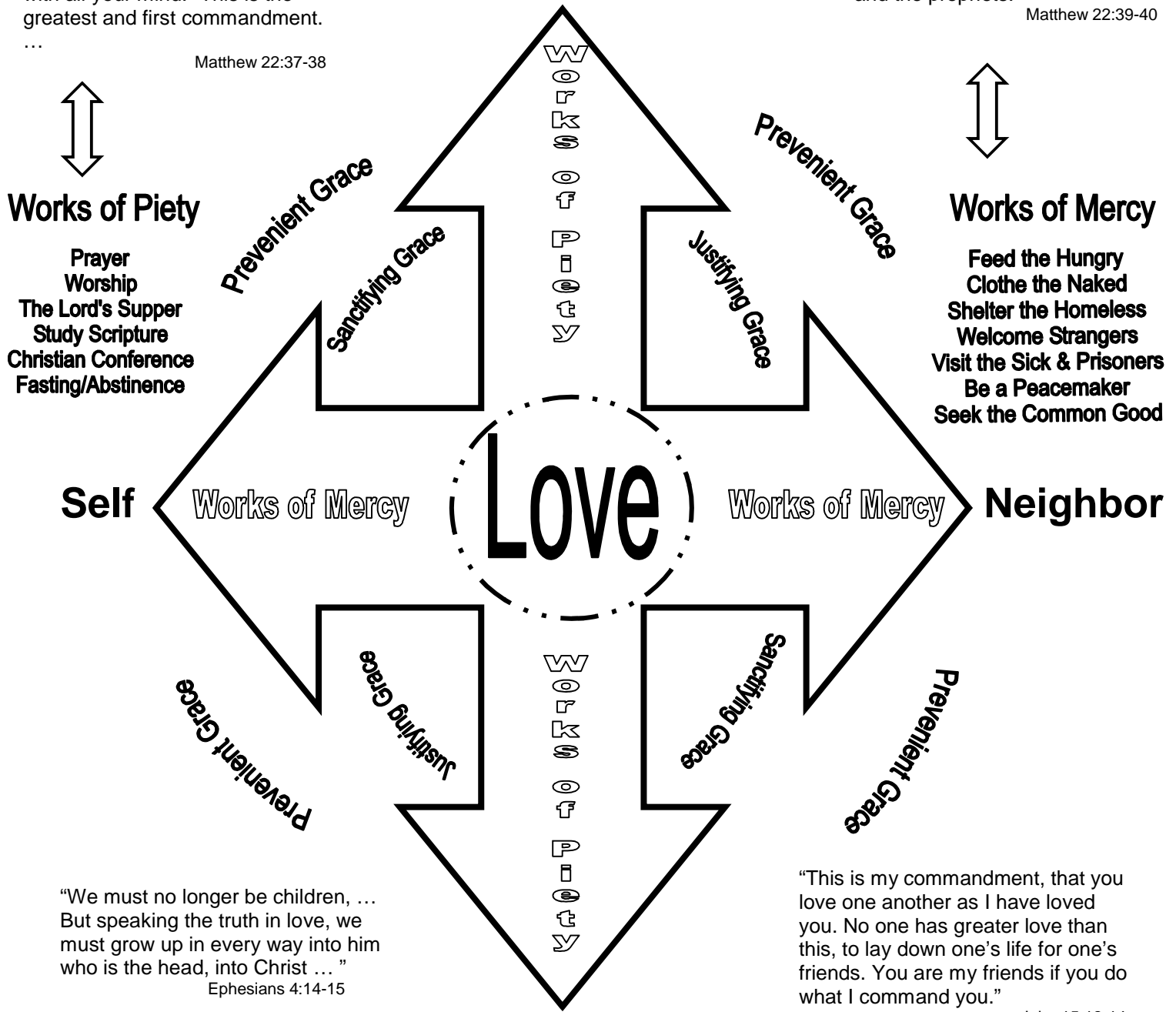
(Father, Son, & Holy Spirit)

Jesus said ... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment.

...
Matthew 22:37-38

... And a second is like it: " You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Matthew 22:39-40



"We must no longer be children, ...
But speaking the truth in love, we
must grow up in every way into him
who is the head, into Christ ..."
Ephesians 4:14-15

"This is my commandment, that you
love one another as I have loved
you. No one has greater love than
this, to lay down one's life for one's
friends. You are my friends if you do
what I command you."

John 15:12-14

The Household of Christ