

Foreword

by John Piper



I don't even think David intended this, but his title and subtitle are a chiasm. And I like it so much, I'm going to build my foreword around it. A chiasm (taken from the Greek letter *chi*, which looks like an X) is a sequence of thoughts in which the first and last member correspond, and the second and second-to-last member correspond, and so on, with a hinge thought in the middle. So the title of the book looks like this in a chiasm:

Habits
of Grace:
Enjoying Jesus
through the Spiritual
Disciplines

Habits corresponds to *Disciplines*. *Grace* corresponds to *Spiritual*. And *Enjoying Jesus* is the hinge. This is loaded with implications for why David's book is worth reading.

The chiasm, and the book, and the theology behind it demand that *enjoying Jesus* be the hinge. But "hinge" only

signifies the swing position in the middle of the other thoughts. There is always more to it than that. In this case, the hinge is the goal of all the rest.

David is writing a book to help you enjoy Jesus. In doing that, he is not trying to be nice. He's trying to be nuclear. His way of thinking about enjoying Jesus is explosive. If you enjoy Jesus more than life (Matt. 10:38), you will live with a radical abandon for Jesus that will make the world wonder. Enjoyment of Jesus is not like icing on the cake; it's like powder in the shell.

Not only is enjoying Jesus explosively transforming in the way we live; it is also essential for making Jesus look great. And that is why we have the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit came to glorify him (John 16:14). The primary mission of the Spirit—and his people—is to show that Jesus is more glorious than anyone or anything else. It cannot be done by those who find this world more enjoyable than Jesus. They make the world look great. Therefore, the ultimate aim of the Christian life—and the universe—hangs on the people of God enjoying the Son of God.

But this is beyond us. Our hearts default to enjoying the world more than Jesus. This is why the hinge thought—enjoying Jesus—is bracketed on both sides by *grace* and *spiritual*.

Grace

Enjoying Jesus

Spiritual

Grace is the free and sovereign work of God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, even though we don't deserve it. *Spiritual* is the biblical word to describe what has been brought about by the Holy Spirit. "Spiritual" does not mean religious, or mystical, or new-age-like. It means: caused and shaped by God's Spirit.

So the point is this: God almighty, by his grace and by his Spirit, does not leave us to ourselves when it comes to enjoying Jesus. He helps us. He does not say, “Delight yourself in the LORD” (Ps. 37:4), and then merely stand back and watch to see if we can. He makes a covenant with us and says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezek. 36:27). He causes what he commands. Enjoying Jesus is not optional. It is a duty. But it is also a gift—spiritual and gracious.

But the gift comes through means. This is why *Grace* is flanked by *Habits*, and *Spiritual* is flanked by *Disciplines*.

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The Bible does not say, “God is at work in you to bring about his good purposes, *therefore* stay in bed.” It says, “Work out your salvation, *because* God is at work in you” (see Phil. 2:12–13). God’s work does not make our work unnecessary; it makes it possible. “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). Grace does not just pardon our failures; it empowers our successes—like successfully enjoying Jesus more than life.

This book is about grace-empowered *habits*, and Spirit-empowered *disciplines*. These are the means God has given for drinking at the fountain of life. They don’t earn the enjoyment. They receive it. They are not payments for pleasure; they are pipelines. The psalmist does not say, “You *sell* them drink,” but, “You *give* them drink from the river of your delights” (Ps. 36:8). But all of us leak. We all need inspiration and instruction for how to drink—again and again. Habitually.

If you have never read a book on “habits of grace” or “spiritual disciplines,” start with this one. If you are a veteran lover of the river of God, but, for some reason, have recently been wandering aimlessly in the desert, this book will be a good way back.

John Piper
desiringGod.org
Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Simple. Practical. Helpful. In *Habits of Grace*, Mathis writes brilliantly about three core spiritual disciplines that will help us realign our lives and strengthen our faith. In a world where everything seems to be getting more complicated, this book will help us to downshift and refocus on the things that matter most.”

Louie Giglio, Pastor, Passion City Church, Atlanta; Founder,
Passion Conferences

“Although this little book says what many others say about Bible reading, prayer, and Christian fellowship (with two or three others tacked on), its great strength and beauty is that it nurtures my resolve to read the Bible and it makes me hungry to pray. If the so-called ‘means of grace’ are laid out as nothing more than duties, the hinge of sanctification is obligation. But in this case, the means of grace are rightly perceived as gracious gifts and signs that God is at work in us, which increases our joy as we stand on the cusp of Christian freedom under the glories of King Jesus.”

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

“Most people assume that disciplined training is necessary for attaining any skill—professional, academic, or athletic. But for some reason, Christians do not see this principle applying to their Christian lives. In his excellent book, *Habits of Grace*, David Mathis makes a compelling case for the importance of the spiritual disciplines, and he does so in such a winsome way that will motivate all of us to practice the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life. This book will be great both for new believers just starting on their journey and as a refresher course for those of us already along the way.”

Jerry Bridges, author, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

“David Mathis has more than accomplished his goal of writing an introduction to the spiritual disciplines. What I love most about the book is how Mathis presents the disciplines—or ‘means of grace’ as he prefers to describe them—as habits to be cultivated in order to enjoy Jesus. The biblical practices Mathis explains are not ends—that was the mistake of the Pharisees in Jesus’s day and of legalists in our time. Rather they are means by which we seek, savor, and enjoy Jesus Christ. May the Lord use this book to help you place yourself ‘in the way of allurement’ that results in an increase of your joy in Jesus.”

Donald S. Whitney, Associate Professor of Biblical Spirituality,
Senior Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern
Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Spiritual Disciplines for the
Christian Life*

“So often as we consider the spiritual disciplines, we think of what we must do individually. Mathis takes a different approach that is both insightful and refreshing. Along with our personal time of prayer and reading, we are encouraged to seek advice from seasoned saints, have conversations about Bible study with others, and pray together. The Christian life, including the disciplines, isn’t meant to be done in isolation. Mathis’s depth of biblical knowledge along with his practical guidance and gracious delivery will leave you eager to pursue the disciplines, shored up by the grace of God.”

Trillia Newbell, author, *United: Captured by God’s Vision for Diversity and Fear and Faith*

“This is the kind of book I turn to periodically to help examine and recalibrate my heart, my priorities, and my walk with the Lord. David Mathis has given us a primer for experiencing and exuding ever-growing delight in Christ through grace-initiated intentional habits that facilitate the flow of yet fuller springs of grace into and through our lives.”

Nancy Leigh DeMoss, author; radio host, *Revive Our Hearts*

“There is not a Christian in the world who has mastered the spiritual disciplines. In fact, the more we grow in grace, the more we realize how little we know of hearing from God, speaking to God, and meditating on God. Our maturity reveals our inadequacy. *Habits of Grace* is a powerful guide to the spiritual disciplines. It offers basic instructions to new believers while bringing fresh encouragement to those who have walked with the Lord for many years. It is a joy to commend it to you.”

Tim Challies, author, *The Next Story*; blogger, *Challies.com*

“When I was growing up, spiritual disciplines were often surrounded by an air of legalism. But today the pendulum has swung in the other direction: it seems that family and private devotions have fallen off the radar. The very word *habits* can be a turnoff, especially in a culture of distraction and autonomy. Yet character is largely a bundle of habits. Christ promises to bless us through his means of grace: his Word preached and written, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Like a baby’s first cry, prayer is the beginning of that life of response to grace given, and we never grow out of it. Besides prayer, there are other habits that grace motivates and shapes. I’m grateful for *Habits of Grace* bringing the disciplines back into the conversation and, hopefully, back into our practice as well.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on the Christian Life*

“David Mathis has given us a book on the spiritual disciplines that is practical, actionable, and accessible. He speaks with a voice that neither scolds nor overwhelms, offering encouragement through suggestions and insights to help even the newest believer find a rhythm by which to employ these means of grace. A treatment of the topic that is wonderfully uncomplicated and thorough, *Habits of Grace* offers both a place to start for beginners and a path to grow for those seasoned in the faith.”

Jen Wilkin, author, *Women of the Word*; Bible study teacher

“I am drawn to books that I know are first lived out in the messiness of life before finding their way onto clean sheets of paper. This is one of those books! David has found a well-worn path to Jesus through the habits of grace he commends to us. I am extremely grateful for David’s commitment to take the timeless message in this book and communicate it in language that is winsome to the mind and warm to the heart. This book has the breadth of a literature review that reads like a devotional. I am eager to get it into the hands of our campus ministry staff and see it being read in dorm rooms and student centers across the country.”

Matt Bradner, Regional Director, Campus Outreach

“David Mathis has provided us with a gospel-driven, Word-centered, Christ-exalting vision of Christian spiritual practices. Furthermore, he understands that sanctification is a community project: the local church rightly looms large in *Habits of Grace*. This book is perfect for small group study, devotional reading, or for passing on to a friend who is thinking about this topic for the first time. I give it my highest recommendation.”

Nathan A. Finn, Dean, The School of Theology and Missions,
Union University

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Preface

I make no pretense that this is the definitive book, or anything close to it, on the spiritual disciplines—better, “the means of grace.” In fact, I’ve been intentional to keep things relatively brief. Think of this as an introduction or orientation. Many important lessons are left to others to provide in more extended treatments.¹ In particular, I am eager to help Christians young and old simplify their approach to their various personal habits of grace, or spiritual disciplines, by highlighting the three key principles of ongoing grace: hearing God’s voice (his word), having his ear (prayer), and belonging to his body (fellowship).

This simplified approach, and many of the ideas developed in the pages ahead, were forged first in the classroom at Bethlehem College & Seminary, where I’ve taught “the disciplines” to the third-year collegiates. Next I made the effort to get the concepts the students seemed to find most helpful into article form at desiringGod.org. The response was encouraging, and Crossway was kind enough to provide the opportunity to bring the thoughts together and extend them in this form.

This volume is intentionally half the size of most others on

¹In particular, as you’ll find throughout the book, I am indebted to three texts I highly recommend—two old friends and one new: Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014); John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004); and Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (New York: Dutton, 2014).

the disciplines. I hope that some readers will go from here to the larger books. But I wanted to provide something shorter, yet still cover the major topics, in hopes of making a simplified approach to the means of grace accessible to others who wouldn't take up the bigger volumes.

However, the roots of this book go back long before teaching college and writing articles. Seeds were sown earlier than I can even remember by my parents and childhood church in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Every morning Pop was up early reading his Bible and praying before heading into the dental office, and Mom typically had her Bible open on the dining room table as she dipped into the Book during the day. I frequently heard refreshers on the basics in varying detail and depth in elementary, middle, and high school classes at church.

In college, through the ministry of Campus Outreach, I was disciplined during the semester and shaped by summer training projects. When I was a college junior, a discipler introduced me to Donald S. Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. I began teaching "how to have a quiet time" to younger students in the context of life-on-life discipleship, and then continued doing so on staff with Campus Outreach in Minneapolis. These experiences eventually led to instructing college juniors at Bethlehem.

I must mention the incalculable influence of John Piper, with whom I have worked closely since 2006. For those who know his ministry of preaching and writing, John's fingerprints will be unmistakable in these pages, both in explicit quotations and in structures of thought and instincts I can't shake, and wouldn't want to. His 2004 book *When I Don't Desire God* is the place to find his most concentrated practical teaching on Bible intake and prayer, but gold nuggets on the means of grace, and his own habits, are scattered throughout his corpus, especially in his annual new-year sermons on Bible and prayer available

at desiringGod.org, and his answers to the litany of practical questions that come through the *Ask Pastor John* daily podcast.

Just after receiving the invitation to publish this book, I read Timothy Keller's *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*. You will see in part 2, on prayer, that already I'm gleaning much from Keller's insights, and I greatly commend his book. My hope is that the little bit I have to say about prayer will point you in the right direction, and then sooner, rather than later, you will take it to the next level, and more, with Keller's remarkable guide.

How This Book Is Different

I eagerly send you to the longer texts on the disciplines, but that doesn't mean I've written this book merely as a summary, with nothing distinct to contribute. Perhaps the key distinguishing feature of this book, in addition to its brevity, is the threefold organizational scheme we've already noted. Here we cast the disciplines not as ten or twelve (or more) distinct practices to work into your life, but as three key principles (God's voice, God's ear, and God's people), which then are fleshed out in countless creative and helpful habits in the varying lives of believers in their differing contexts.

In particular, this structure restores fellowship as a means of grace to its essential place in the Christian life. Piper's, Keller's, and Whitney's books focus on personal disciplines, and include no extended sections, much less a full chapter, on the role of fellowship.² In structuring this book in three parts, similar practices can be grouped and understood together, such that individual chapters are shorter and designed for reading in one sitting. My hope is that this will help you move toward application in your own practices by making clear that the point isn't

²Whitney has made a good effort to compensate for it with *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1996).

to practice at all times in one's Christian walk every single specific discipline addressed, but to understand the key pathways of ongoing grace and seek to create regular habits for these principles in life.

At Crossway's request, I've written a study guide to accompany this book for those who would like to deepen their reflections and applications. It is designed for both individual and group study, and is available in workbook format.

My prayer is that you will not come away exasperated that you simply don't have time to put into practice all that this book commends. Rather, in its very structure, the book aims to help you see how realistic and life-giving it can be to integrate God's means of grace into daily habits of life.

And alongside the emphasis on fellowship, this book also hopes to make the pursuit of joy more central, explicit, and pronounced than has typically been the case in many texts on the disciplines.

My Dream and Prayer for You

My prayer for you as you read is that you would find the means of grace to be practical, realistic, and desirable in your pursuit of joy in Christ. I hope that there are many things here beneficial to a general Christian audience, but that there will be a special appeal to college students and young adults who are learning to fly for themselves for the first time in the various rhythms and practices of the Christian life.

My dream is that this book would serve you with simplicity, stability, confidence, power, and joy. *Simplicity* in that looking at the means of grace in three main channels will help you understand the matrix of grace for living the Christian life and create practical pathways (your own habits) that are realistic and life-giving in your unique season of life. *Stability* in that getting to know your own soul, and creating rhythms and practices,

will help you weather the ups and downs of life in this fallen world with the contentment that comes, in some measure, from knowing ourselves and learning ways in which we can help “lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet” (Heb. 12:12–13) and “keep yourselves in the love of God” (Jude 21). *Confidence* in that as you walk these paths, you’ll see how God is faithful to sustain us and give us “grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). *Power* in that hearing his word, having his ear, and belonging to his body fill our souls with spiritual energy and strength for the pouring out of ourselves in ministry and mission. And *joy* to satisfy our deepest longings that will only be met in their fullness when we see the God-man face to face and live in perfect communion with him, and all our fellows in him, forever.

The note we will strike again and again, without any apology, is that the means of grace, fleshed out in our various habits of grace, are to be for us *means of joy* in God, and thus means of his glory. And so the simplicity, stability, confidence, power, and joy of God himself stand behind these means. These are the paths of his promise. He stands ready to pour out his wonderfully wild and lavish grace through these channels. Are you ready?

Introduction

Grace Gone Wild

The grace of God is on the loose. Contrary to our expectations, counter to our assumptions, frustrating our judicial sentiments, and mocking our craving for control, the grace of God is turning the world upside down. God is shamelessly pouring out his lavish favor on undeserving sinners of all stripes and thoroughly stripping away our self-sufficiency.

Before turning our focus to “the means of grace,” and the practices (“habits”) that ready us to go on receiving God’s grace in our lives, this much must be clear from the outset: The grace of God is gloriously beyond our skill and technique. The means of grace are not about earning God’s favor, twisting his arm, or controlling his blessing, but readying ourselves for consistent saturation in the roll of his tides.

Grace has been on the move since before creation, roaming wild and free. Even before the foundation of the world, it was the untamed grace of God that jumped the bounds of time and space and considered a yet-to-be-created people in connection with his Son, and chose us in him (Eph. 1:4). It was in love—to the praise of his glorious grace—that “he predestined us for

adoption as sons through Jesus” (Eph. 1:5). Such divine choice was not based on foreseeing anything good in us. He chose us by grace—not “on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:5–6). It was “not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began” (2 Tim. 1:9).

With patience, then—through creation, fall, and flood, through Adam, Noah, Abraham, and King David—God prepared the way. Humanity waited and groaned, gathering up the crumbs of his compassion as a foretaste of some feast to come. The prophets “prophesied about the grace that was to be yours” (1 Pet. 1:10). And in the fullness of time, it came. He came.

Invading Our Space

Now “the grace of God has appeared” (Titus 2:11). Grace couldn’t be kept from becoming flesh and dwelling among us in the God-man, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:16). The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth are here in him (John 1:17). Grace has a face.

But grace would not be restricted even here, even in this man. Grace would not just be embodied but break the chains to roam the globe unfettered. It was sheer grace that united us by faith to Jesus, Grace Incarnate, and blessed us in him “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). In grace were we called with effect (Gal. 1:6) and given new birth in our souls. Because of grace unmeasured, boundless, free, now our once-dead hearts beat and our once-lifeless lungs breathe. Only through grace do we believe (Acts 18:27) and only in grace do we receive “repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 2:25).

But such wild grace keeps going. We are given the Spirit of grace, experience our long-planned adoption, and enabled to

cry, “Abba! Father!” (Rom. 8:15). We receive “the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7).

Grace keeps breaking through barriers and casting away restraints. *Grace justifies*. A perfect, unimpeachable, divinely approved, humanly applied righteousness is ours in this union with Jesus. We are “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24; Titus 3:7). Through this one man Jesus, we are counted among “those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17). And so we happily say with Paul, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21).¹

Breaking into Our Lives

And just when we think we have been carried far enough, that God has done for us all that we could imagine and more, grace shatters the mold again. *Grace sanctifies*. It is too wild to let us stay in love with unrighteousness. Too free to leave us in slavery to sin. Too untamed to let our lusts go unconquered. Grace’s power is too uninhibited to not unleash us for the happiness of true holiness.

So it is that we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18) and live “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). Grace abounds not through our continuing in sin, but through our Spirit-empowered, ongoing liberation (Rom. 6:1). Grace is too strong to leave us passive, too potent to let us wallow in the mire of our sins and weaknesses. “My grace is sufficient for you,” Jesus says, “for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). It is the grace of God that gives us his “means of grace” for our ongoing perseverance

¹For more on justification by faith alone, and in particular how it relates to sanctification and the Christian’s pursuit of growth and holiness in the Christian life, see “The Search for Sanctification’s Holy Grail,” in *Acting the Miracle: God’s Work and Ours in the Mystery of Sanctification*, ed. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 13–27.

and growth and joy this side of the coming new creation. And the grace of God inspires and empowers the various habits and practices by which we avail ourselves of God's means.

Flooding the Future

Just when we're sure it is done, and certain that some order must be restored and some boundary established, God's grace not only floods our future in this life but also spans the divide into the next, and pours out onto the plains of our eternity. *Grace glorifies.*

If the Scriptures didn't make plain this story of our glory, we'd be scared to even dream of such grace. Not only will Jesus be glorified in us, but we will be glorified in him, "according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:12). He is "the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ" (1 Pet. 5:10). So Peter tells us to "set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:13). It will be indescribably stunning in the coming ages as he shows "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). Even the most mature among us have only begun to taste the grace of God.

Chosen before time. Called with effect. United to Jesus in faith and repentance. Adopted and forgiven. Justified. Sanctified. Glorified. And satisfied forever. This is grace gone wonderfully wild. This is the flood of God's favor in which we discover the power and practice of the means of grace.

Put Yourself in the Path of God's Grace

It is in this endless sea of his grace that we walk the path of the Christian life and take steps of grace-empowered effort and initiative. It works something like this.

I can flip a switch, but I don't provide the electricity. I can turn on a faucet, but I don't make the water flow. There will be no light and no liquid refreshment without someone else providing it. And so it is for the Christian with the ongoing grace of God. His grace is essential for our spiritual lives, but we don't control the supply. We can't make the favor of God flow, but he has given us circuits to connect and pipes to open expectantly. There are paths along which he has promised his favor.

As we have celebrated above, our God is lavish in his grace; he is free to liberally dispense his goodness without even the least bit of cooperation and preparation on our part, and often he does. But he also has his regular channels. And we can routinely avail ourselves of these revealed paths of blessing—or neglect them to our detriment.

Where the Grace Keeps Passing

“The essence of the Christian life,” writes John Piper, “is learning to fight for joy in a way that does not replace grace.” We cannot earn God's grace or make it flow apart from his free gift. But we can position ourselves to go on getting as he keeps on giving. We can “fight to walk in the paths where he has promised his blessings.”² We can ready ourselves to remain receivers along his regular routes, sometimes called “the spiritual disciplines,” or even better, “the means of grace.”³

Such practices need not be fancy or highfalutin.⁴ They are the

²John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 43–44.

³I prefer “means of grace” to “spiritual disciplines.” In one sense, this is a book essentially concerned with what many would call the Christian “spiritual disciplines.” However, I find that the language of “means of grace” coheres more consistently with the theology of the Bible about such practices and helps to keep the key emphases in their proper places. “Means of grace,” according to D. A. Carson, is “a lovely expression less susceptible to misinterpretation than spiritual disciplines.” Carson, “Spiritual Disciplines,” in *Themelios*, 36, no. 3 (November 2011).

⁴As we will see, the means of grace are first and foremost principles, which can be fleshed out in countless, creative practices (“habits”).

stuff of everyday, basic Christianity—unimpressively mundane, but spectacularly potent by the Spirit. While there’s no final and complete list of such practices, the long tally of helpful habits can be clustered underneath three main principles: hearing God’s voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body. Or simply: word, prayer, and fellowship.⁵

In the last generation, we have seen some resurgence of interest among Christians in the spiritual disciplines, many of which were considered “means of grace” by our spiritual ancestors. “The doctrine of the disciplines,” says J. I. Packer, “is really a restatement and extension of classical Protestant teaching on the means of grace.”⁶ Whatever the term, the key is that God has revealed certain channels through which he regularly pours out his favor. And we’re foolish not to take his word on them and build habits of spiritual life around them.

What Means of Grace Means and Doesn’t

To put *means* with *grace* might endanger the free nature of grace. But it need not do so—not if the means are coordinate with receiving and the exertions of effort are graciously supplied. This is emphatically the case for the Christian. Here there is no ground for boasting.⁷

⁵ John Frame, in *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), organizes the means of grace under these three headings. This way of categorizing it is close to Luke’s summary of early-church life in Acts 2:42: “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching [the word] and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread [which we categorize under fellowship] and the prayers.” J. C. Ryle shows a similar system of categorization when he writes, “The ‘means of grace’ are such as Bible reading, private prayer, and regularly worshipping God in Church, wherein one hears the Word taught and participates in the Lord’s Supper. I lay it down as a simple matter of fact that no one who is careless about such things must ever expect to make much progress in sanctification. I can find no record of any eminent saint who ever neglected them. They are appointed channels through which the Holy Spirit conveys fresh supplies of grace to the soul and strengthens the work which He has begun in the inward man. . . . Our God is a God who works by means, and He will never bless the soul of that man who pretends to be so high and spiritual that he can get on without them.” J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Peabody, MN: Hendrickson, 2007), 26.

⁶ Foreword for Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), ix–x.

⁷ Along with the Reformed tradition of Christian theology, I mean something distinctly Protestant by “means of grace.” I do not believe that the various “means of grace” function auto-

The one on whom we lean is “the God of all grace” (1 Pet. 5:10). He not only elects the undeserving without condition (Rom. 8:29–33; Eph. 1:4) and works in them the miracle of new birth and the gift of faith, but he also freely declares them righteous by that faith (“justification”) and begins supplying the flow of spiritual life and energy to experience the joy of increasing Christlikeness.

As we have seen, God’s immense flood of grace not only sees us as holy in Christ but also progressively produces holy desires in us (“sanctification”). It is grace to be forgiven of sinful acts, and grace to be supplied the heart for righteous ones. It is grace that we are increasingly “conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29), and grace that he doesn’t leave us in the misery of our sin but pledges to bring to completion the good work he has begun in us (Phil. 1:6).

For the glory of God, the good of others, and the satisfaction of our souls, the aim of the Christian life is our coming to share in such Christlikeness or godliness—which is “holiness” rightly understood. And all our exertions of effort toward that goal are gifts of grace.

Train Yourself for Godliness

Yes, it is grace, and yes, we expend effort. And so the apostle Paul says to his protégé, “Train yourself for godliness” (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline yourself for growth. Take regular action to get more of God in your mind and your heart, and echo his ways

matically (*ex opere operato* in the Catholic tradition), but are God’s promised paths of blessing when received with conscious, active faith in God as the giver through Jesus Christ. Grace, then, is dispensed not by the church, but by Jesus himself. As Scottish theologian James Bannerman writes, “It is not the Church that governs and dispenses ordinances and spiritual graces in his name, and by reason of his original gift and endowment to her, but Christ who, personally present, governs and administers ordinances and blessing through the Church. The Church has no store of life apart from Christ being in it; the ordinances of the Church have no deposit of grace apart from Christ present with them; the office-bearers of the Church have no gift or power, or authority, or action, apart from Christ ruling and acting by them.” James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1 (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009), 199.

in your life—which will make you increasingly like him (“godliness”). It’s a gift, and we receive it as we become it.

Paul’s own reliance on God for ongoing grace is a powerful testimony to this Christian dynamic of the means of grace and the habits of life we cultivate. He says in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “By the grace of God I am what I am. . . . I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” God’s grace didn’t make Paul passive but supplied the energy for discipline and effort, and every ounce of energy expended was all of grace.

And Paul says in Romans 15:18, “I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me.” Jesus’s grace, in this instance, didn’t mean accomplishing his purpose despite Paul, or apart from him, but *through* him. Where does the apostle get the power to labor and expend such spiritual effort? “I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Col. 1:29).

How to Receive the Gift of Effort

This dynamic is true not just because Paul is an apostle, but because he is a Christian. So he says to every believer, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” because of this great promise: “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12–13). And so the majestic epistle to the Hebrews closes with a prayer for God’s “working in us that which is pleasing in his sight” (Heb. 13:20–21).

The way to receive the gift of God’s empowering our actions is to do the actions. If he gives the gift of effort, we receive that gift *by* expending the effort. When he gives the grace of growing in holiness, we don’t receive that gift apart from becoming more holy. When he gives us the desire to get more of him in the Scriptures, or in prayer, or among his people, we don’t re-

ceive that gift without experiencing the desire and living out the pursuits that flow from it.

Lay Yourself in the Way of Allurement

Zacchaeus may have been a wee little man, but he modeled this big reality by positioning himself along the path of grace. He couldn't force Jesus's hand, he couldn't make grace flow automatically, but he could put himself by faith along the path where Grace was coming (Luke 19:1–10). The same was true of blind Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35–43). He couldn't earn the restoration of his sight, but he could station himself along the route of grace where Jesus might give the gift as he passed that way.

“Think of the Spiritual Disciplines,” says Donald S. Whitney, “as ways we can place ourselves in the path of God's grace and seek him as Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus placed themselves in Jesus's path and sought him.”⁸ Or as Jonathan Edwards put it, you can “endeavor to promote spiritual appetites by *laying yourself in the way of allurement*.”⁹ We cannot force Jesus's hand, but we can put ourselves along the paths of grace where we can be expectant of his blessing.

God's regular channels of grace, as we will see, are his voice, his ear, and his body. He often showers his people with unexpected favor. But typically the grace that sends our roots deepest, truly grows us up in Christ, prepares our soul for a new day, produces lasting spiritual maturity, and increases the current of our joy streams from the ordinary and unspectacular paths of fellowship, prayer, and Bible intake given practical expression in countless forms and habits.

⁸ Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, 13.

⁹ “The Spiritual Blessings of the Gospel Represented by a Feast,” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1723–1729*, ed. Kenneth Minkema, vol. 14 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 286. Emphasis added.

While these simple habits of grace may seem as unimpressive as everyday switches and faucets, through them God regularly stands ready to give his true light and the water of life.

The Great End of the Means

Before we begin to say more about Jesus's word, his ear, and his church in the pages ahead, we need to make clear what is the greatest grace along these paths: Jesus himself. The great end of the means is knowing and enjoying him. The final joy in any truly Christian discipline or practice or rhythm of life is, in the words of the apostle, "the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). "This is eternal life," and this is the goal of the means of grace: "that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

When all is said and done, our hope is not to be a skilled Bible reader, practiced pray-er, and faithful churchman, but to be the one who "understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth" (Jer. 9:23–24). And so our heartbeat in the habits we develop for hearing every word, speaking every prayer, and participating in every act of fellowship is Hosea 6:3: "Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD." Knowing and enjoying Jesus is the final end of hearing his voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body.

The means of grace, and their many good expressions, will serve to make us more like him, but only as our focus returns continually to Christ himself, not our own Christlikeness. It is in "beholding the glory of the Lord" that we "are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18). Spiritual growth is a marvelous effect of such practices, but in a sense it is only a side effect. The heart is knowing and enjoying Jesus.

The Means of Grace and the Things of Earth

One important question our study raises is how these means of grace relate to the rest of God’s creation. In an important sense, all of God’s creation can serve as means of his grace, not just his word, prayer, and fellowship.¹⁰ My friend and fellow pastor Joe Rigney skillfully addresses this in *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts*.¹¹ His chapter on “Rhythms of Godwardness” intersects most explicitly with our focus on the means of grace and their habits. He writes about “two different types of godwardness . . . direct godwardness and indirect godwardness.”¹²

Rigney’s focus is on the second type and how we can treasure the God of heaven in the things of earth, while this book addresses the first—treasuring God through his appointed means of grace, those special channels through which he supplies ongoing blessing to his church. This twofold model (direct and indirect godwardness) serves Rigney’s project well, but our inclusion of fellowship, not just God’s word and prayer, as a means of grace raises a cluster of questions: Is corporate Christianity to be considered direct or indirect godwardness? Is it direct when we’re gathered for corporate worship and indirect when we’re conversing with each other about gospel realities? Or even more specifically, is it direct when we’re singing (to God) in corporate worship but indirect when we’re listening to a preacher? Is sharing in the Lord’s Supper direct or indirect? The twofold concept works well for personal Bible meditation and prayer on the one hand, and for vocation and recreation

¹⁰For one, his word is not only the “special revelation” of the Scriptures, but also the “general revelation” of the skies, and all creation. “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge” (Ps. 19:1–2).

¹¹Joe Rigney, *The Things of Earth: Treasuring God by Enjoying His Gifts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). John Piper also gives a chapter to “How to Wield the World in the Fight for Joy,” in *When I Don’t Desire God*.

¹²Rigney, *Things of Earth*, 121.

on the other, but the clarity breaks down when we turn to corporate godwardness, which doesn't fit well as "direct" or "indirect."

One way forward, at least for this book, is to consider "corporate godwardness" its own category alongside the direct godwardness of personal Bible meditation and prayer and the indirect godwardness of engaging with the things of earth. Certainly communing intentionally with fellow Christians about the things of heaven is fundamentally different than interacting with nonbelievers about sports and the weather, or fellow believers for that matter. If we add a third category and make it a triad, then this book is taken up mainly with two: direct godwardness in parts 1 and 2 and corporate godwardness in part 3.¹³

Your Habits, God's Grace

The means of grace are God's promised channels of continuing grace, received by faith. Infinite grace is behind us, and infinite grace lies ahead, and through his appointed means of grace, God is pleased to supply ongoing life and energy and health and strength to our souls. The means of grace fill our tank for the pursuit of joy, for the good of others, and for the glory of God. They are *spiritual* blessings, not the gravely mistimed *material* blessings promised prematurely in the so-called "prosperity gospel." And they are *blessings*—not mere disciplines, but channels through which God gives us spiritual food for our survival, growth, and flourishing in the mission.

For more than a generation now, we have seen a renewal of interest among Christians in the spiritual disciplines. There has

¹³Rigney's book, then, also focuses on two of the three: indirect godwardness and corporate godwardness. Corporate godwardness is the category our projects share in common, while the respective direct or indirect focus makes them distinct. I eagerly send you to Rigney's book to consider how "the things of earth" can serve as (general) means of God's grace.

been much good in this renewal. But too many have emphasized technique and skill, with the unfortunate diminishing, or neglect, of God's role as supplier and provider. Too often the stress has been on the individual's initiative and effort, with little said about the place of the church and the corporate nature of God's plan. Much has been said in terms of duty, and too little said about joy. And the seeming proliferation of long lists of disciplines can leave young Christians overwhelmed by what they're not practicing, and in some cases contribute to a low-grade sense of guilt which threatens to keep us from fully engaging with the rest of our everyday lives for which these practices should be preparing us.

My hope in reshifting the focus from the spiritual disciplines to the means of grace—and then the various personal habits of grace that we develop in light of them—is to keep the gospel and the energy of God at the center, to draw in the essential (and often neglected) corporate aspect, and to simplify the way we think about these practices (as hearing God's voice, having his ear, and belonging to his body). My prayer is that this approach will help to make the means of grace, and your own habits that develop around them, not just accessible and realistic but truly God's means of your knowing and enjoying Jesus.