

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 14, 2011**

THE MEANS OF GRACE:

1. THE WORD OF GOD

2 Timothy 3:14-17

The last time I preached, which was three weeks ago, we looked together at the last words of Peter recorded in the Bible. Those last words are found in 2 Peter 3:18, which begins with the exhortation to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” and ends with this doxology of praise: “To Him” – to our great and all-sufficient Savior and Lord – “be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

Among the things I hope you took away from the message three weeks ago is this: Not only are we saved by grace – which, as you know, is given free of charge to people who do not deserve it and never will, like you and me – but it is by grace that we live our lives as followers of Christ. It is by the grace of God that we grow spiritually. It is by God’s sanctifying grace, through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, that we become more and more like Jesus in the way we think and speak and act.

Whether you have ever thought of it this way or not, this is God’s purpose for your life and mine. The first of Bill Bright’s *Four Spiritual Laws* says: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” It may seem to you sometimes that God’s plan for your life isn’t so wonderful – when life is hard and you are carrying a heavy load of some kind. But the idea that God has a wonderful plan for your life is not meant to suggest that you will never have any problems or pain or disappointment. In the midst of those things, and everything else that God allows in our lives, it is still true: God really does love you – more than these finite minds of ours can fully comprehend. And God really does have a wonderful plan for your life. His plan – His purpose, His goal – is for you (and me, too) to be molded and shaped and formed into the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29). He does not want us to “conform any longer to the pattern of this world” – or, as J. B. Phillips famously said, to “let the world around you squeeze you into its mold” (Romans 12:2a). God does not want us to mirror the attitudes and values and ways of the world around us. The late John Stott, a true giant of the faith who went home to heaven just last month, noted in one of his commentaries that the pressures on us to give in and conform to our culture today are “colossal” (*The Message of 2 Timothy*, p. 92). “Colossal” is a good word for it, isn’t it? The pressure to conform is enormous. It is both pervasive and relentless. It is everywhere. In the opening verses of 2 Timothy 3, Paul warns Timothy about difficult days ahead when “people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable [unforgiving], slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance [form] of godliness, but denying its power” (2 Timothy 3:2-5, ESV). Sounds like those days are now, doesn’t it? If you need any confirmation, just turn on the TV, open *The Washington Post* any day of the week, check out just about any popular magazine, or visit the internet. But if you do, be careful. I’m serious. Guard your heart. Guard your mind. Guard your eyes.

The pressure to conform is inescapable, unless you check out of society and go live as a hermit somewhere, which is not an option for most of us. Nor is it God's will. God wants us to bear witness to Him, and to be instruments of His grace and power *in* the world. He does not want us to be *like* the world, which has turned its back on both His sovereignty and His saving grace. He does not want us to live by the world's values and rules. *In* the world, yes, but not *of* it, as Jesus says in John 17. He has a better plan for us, a better plan for His church, a better plan for everyone who trusts in Him for salvation and seeks to live under His lordship. Paul tells us in Romans 12:2 that, instead of being conformed to the world around us, God wants us to be transformed (the word Paul uses here is the Greek word *metamorphoo*) by the renewing of our minds through the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit in us, so that each one of us will be able to see and affirm and embrace and do God's "good, pleasing, and perfect will," to the praise and glory of God.

That is God's wonderful plan for your life. And mine. It involves growing in both grace and understanding. It involves a radical change on the inside – the metamorphosis or transformation of our hearts and minds – which gets worked out in daily life. As Paul says elsewhere (Colossians 2:7), it involves being rooted or grounded and built up in Christ, and made strong in the faith, living a life marked by thankfulness. And it involves standing firm in the faith. It involves staying with it. As Paul says to Timothy in verse 14 of our Scripture reading, it involves continuing in the truth you have been taught from God's Word, even (or especially) when it comes under attack from voices in the media, voices in popular culture, voices in the world of education or, sadly, the voices of false teachers in the church itself. We are not to allow ourselves to be "blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (Ephesians 4:14), but to stand firm in the truth of the Christian faith "like a rock in mountain torrent" (Stott, *2 Timothy*, p. 92), or, as it says in Psalm 1:3, "like a tree planted by streams of water" that will not be uprooted.

QUESTION: If this is God's plan for your life and mine, what tools or means of grace has God provided for us to grow up in His grace, to be changed more and more into the likeness of Christ, to stand strong and firm in the faith when voices all around us seek to undermine it or even destroy it?

ANSWER: There are several which we will talk about in the coming weeks. Some of them, I'm sure, will be intuitively obvious to you. That they may be self-evident is a good thing, as long as we don't take them for granted, or mistake "spiritual activities" with "spiritual maturity." The Pharisees of Jesus' day are Exhibit I that they are not necessarily linked. I'll say more about this another time. While some means of grace may be obvious to you, others may be not so obvious. The God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10) may show you a way to grow in your experience of His grace that is new to you. God willing, I pray it will be the case for every one of us. Including me.

(1) THE WORD OF GOD AS A MEANS OF GRACE

The first of these means of grace I want to consider with you is the Bible itself, which we affirm to be the Word of God written – divinely inspired (God-breathed), unerring, authoritative, and the final and only infallible rule for what we are to believe and how we are

to live. Let's look at 2 Timothy 3:14-17, which is one of the clearest statements anywhere in the Bible about the Bible itself, about the place and power and purpose of the Bible in our lives. I'm sure it is a familiar passage to many of you. If not, I hope you will take time to become familiar with it.

Notice what Paul does here. In verses 14 and 15, he urges Timothy to remain true to the teachings of Scripture which pointed him to Jesus. Paul wanted Timothy not to drift away or turn away from the faith, not to be led astray by any of the false teachers of his day, but to continue in what he had been taught from the Scriptures since childhood, because Timothy could trust in the trustworthiness of those who had taught him the truth of the gospel.

To whom is Paul referring here? Most likely he is talking about Timothy's mother Eunice and grandmother Lois, whose faith in the Lord Jesus he has already lifted up for special mention in 2 Timothy 1:5. Timothy was blessed with a godly family heritage of faith. Through the influence and efforts of his mother and grandmother, Timothy's life had been steeped in the Word of God from the very beginning. Paul brings this out in verse 15, where he reminds Timothy of "how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." From the very earliest days of his life, Timothy was taught the truth of God's Word.

Praise God for Eunice and Lois, and their devotion to discipling Timothy. But do you notice what is missing from this picture? Timothy's father. There is no mention of him. Apparently Timothy's father was not a Christian (see Acts 16:1) and was not involved in the spiritual nurture and training of his son. Timothy, praise God, came to faith in Christ anyway, but how much better to have both a mom and a dad who are mutually involved in pointing their children to Jesus, and teaching them the message of the Bible and the great articles of the Christian faith. If you are neglecting the spiritual instruction or nurture of your child, or if you are satisfied to let your wife (or husband) handle it, I think there is a message in this for you.

So, Paul reminds Timothy of the trustworthiness of his mother and grandmother, and the spiritual investment they made in his life. I think Paul also includes himself here, for he had been Timothy's mentor in the faith and ministry over the course of many years. Because of Eunice, Lois and Paul – and perhaps others, too – Timothy knew the Scriptures. He knew the Word of God. And he knew the God of the Word.

As you probably know, this letter of 2 Timothy contains the last words we have from Paul. It was written shortly before his death in Rome. Knowing his earthly life would soon come to an end, Paul reminds Timothy of something we too quickly forget – or choose to ignore – which is that immersing ourselves in the Word of God is essential if we are to understand and appropriate the grace of God, grow to spiritual maturity as children of God, and fulfill the purposes of God in our lives. Paul points out both the origin and the purpose of the Holy Scriptures, which for us consist of the 39 books of the New Testament. "All Scripture," he says in verse 16, "is God-breathed" (NIV) or "breathed out by God" (ESV). The Greek word Paul uses here is *theopneustos*, which means not merely that God breathed His life and truth

into the words of men, but that Scripture was brought into its very existence by the breath or Spirit of God, written in the words of men by men under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The origin or inspiration of Scripture and its authority are inextricably connected. Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith expresses it this way: “The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any (person) or church but completely on God, its author, who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the Word of God.” The authority of the Bible, you see, rests ultimately on its authorship. As Jerry Bridges writes in *Transforming Grace*, the Bible is not merely a book *about* God. It is a book *from* God (p. 217). The late James Boice wrote in his masterpiece *Foundations of the Christian Faith* that “the Bible is something more than a body of revealed truths, a collection of books verbally inspired by God.” The Bible is all of this, but it is more than this. “It is also the living voice of God. The living God speaks through its pages” (p. 48).

In the pages of the Bible God has spoken. From beginning to end, the Bible is God’s revelation of Himself, His ways and His will, His acts in creation and history, the unfolding of His plan of redemption through the person and work of His Son Jesus Christ our Savior, and the establishment and Holy Spirit-powered mission of His church in the world. In the Bible God has spoken decisively, authoritatively, infallibly, sovereignly, with amazing grace and sacrificial love. And God still speaks today through His Word. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that “the word of God is living and active.” Like a surgeon’s scalpel, as it says in *The Message*, it is able to cut through our doubts and defenses, to lay bare the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts.

In this, we see something of the enduring purpose of God’s Word. Its purpose, first of all, is to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). The purpose of the Bible is to point us to the Savior and to show us the way to be saved through faith in Him. In addition, as Paul says in verses 16 and 17, it is useful or profitable in these specific ways:

- The Bible *teaches* us the truth about God, about the world, about ourselves, and about God’s provision for our salvation.
- The Bible *rebukes* and *refutes* our errors in both belief and living. It *exposes* our sin, and calls it what it is. This, of course, is not always pleasant. In fact, is it ever pleasant? But it is necessary. And it is a measure of God’s mercy and grace that He shows us our errors, our rebellion against Him, our hidden sins (Psalm 19:12), along with those which are out there for everyone to see, and with patience beyond parallel calls us back to Him.
- Not only does the Bible rebuke and refute and expose what is wrong with us (including what is wrong *in* us), it also *corrects* our errors. When we make a wrong turn in life, it calls us to turn around. It shows us the right path to take, the way God wants us to go. As it says in Psalm 119:105, God’s word is a lamp to our feet, and a light for our path. It guides us in the way of life God desires for us.
- The Bible *instructs* us or *trains* us in the right way to live, so that we may grow in the likeness of Christ and live in a way that brings honor and glory to God.

God's Word, Paul says, is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness – all of which we all need – so that each one of us individually and all of us together may be equipped in every way for every good work that God has ordained for us to do in order to serve His purposes right here and now in our generation, and to bring glory to His name.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson restates verses 15-17 in *The Message*: “There’s nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us.”

You see, the Bible is not meant to simply fill our heads with knowledge about God. D. L. Moody said it this way: “The Bible was not given for our information but for our transformation.”

I’ve got another book for you today. Many of you know that John Ortberg is one of my favorite authors and preachers. I’ve told you before that his book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat* had a major impact on my life several years ago. He has also written a book called *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (subtitled *Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*), which I commend to you. He has this passage in 2 Timothy 3 in mind when he says: “Paul does not say that the purpose of knowing Scripture is to enable us, when we go to heaven, to get a 100 score on the entrance exam. He says the purpose is for us to become equipped for good works. Or, to put it another way, it is for us to become transformed into the kind of people from whom goodness flows like an unceasing stream of water” (p. 182). He goes on to say: “To be filled with knowledge about the Bible but to be unwashed (unaffected, unchanged) by it is worse than not knowing it at all” (p. 184).

The goal is not simply to get us into the Scriptures, but to get the Scriptures into us in a way that changes us and transforms us from the inside out and makes us more and more like Jesus.

I’m not going to stand here today and tell you that unless you read the Bible every day, unless you spend 10 minutes or 30 minutes or 60 minutes in the Word of God each day you will never be a serious Christian or you’ll never grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. No, this is not about a legalistic kind of discipline. But it is true that grace comes disguised as spiritual disciplines. God uses this discipline to grow us up, to build us up and to communicate His grace to us in ways that we can share with others to make a difference in their lives. It’s not about checking a box on your daily list of things to do in order to be spiritual. No. It is about progressively getting to know God better, learning more and more about who God is and hearing God’s voice speaking to you in the pages of holy Scripture. And then translating all of that into a life that expresses the character, the values of Jesus Himself. Spiritual disciplines are necessary for spiritual growth, but they are not these kinds of duties that you do just in order to make yourself feel like you’ve done it. More than a duty, it’s a privilege that’s given by God to enable us to know Him better, to grow His grace, to know how to share that grace with others. To grow in grace requires that we grow in the assimilation of God’s Word in our lives. Not that we just gain more knowledge, but that we

allow the Word of God to be absorbed into our hearts and minds so that His Word becomes a part of who we are and finds expression in the way we live. That's a means of grace. A means of grace that we neglect to our own loss. I simply urge you to take time to let God speak to you regularly from His Word and you will be blessed as you do it.

Lord let it be so in us. Amen.