

Opening Ourselves to Grace



Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: The Role of the Means of Grace in Christian Faith and Life



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Contents

Introduction	3
Resources for Learning	8
Week One	9
Week Two	11
Week Three	12
Week Four	15
Week Five	17
Week Six	19
The Shape of Discipleship	21
The Wesleyan Way of Making Disciples of Jesus Christ	22

INTRODUCTION

Christian faith is, first and foremost, a relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship is very much like that which you share with a spouse or dear friend. If we want it to grow and last, if we value it, then we invest time and energy into nurturing it. We do this by spending time with the one we love, we share our hopes and dreams and listen to his or her hopes and dreams, we learn likes and dislikes, and we make time to go where he or she likes to go and make friends with his or her friends. These are some of the things we do with, and for, a spouse or dear friend.

Our relationship with Christ requires similar participation on our part if we value it and desire to grow in our love for him. We make time to be with him. We pour out our hearts and tell him our hopes and dreams. We also listen to what he has to say to us. We make the effort to learn his likes and dislikes and learn to love all that he loves. We also go where he lives and make friends with his friends (people who are poor, captives, blind, oppressed, sick, hungry, and sinners).

The basic practices of Christian faith and life I've described above are how we participate with and grow in our love for Jesus Christ. You probably know them better as the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, scripture, the Lord's Supper, service with the poor, sick, and prisoners. In the Wesleyan/United Methodist tradition these are known as *means of grace* because they are the places God promises to meet us. They are the times and places we make ourselves available to grace. We do this because, as we open ourselves to grace, we allow God's love to forgive our sins, heal our brokenness, and form us into the persons God created us to be. Of course, if we want such a relationship with Christ, we need to do our part and regularly keep our appointments with him.

At the center of Wesleyan/United Methodist theology and practice is a rich, abiding passion for cooperation with the divine grace revealed and offered to the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. John Wesley defined grace as:

By "the grace of God" is sometimes to be understood **that free love, that unmerited mercy**, by which I, a sinner, through the merits of Christ am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means **that power of God the Holy Ghost which "works in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure"** (Phil. 2:13). As soon as ever the grace of God (in the former sense, his pardoning love) is manifested to our soul, the grace of God (in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit) takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to mortals was impossible. Now we can order our relationships aright. We can do all things in the light and power of that love, through Christ which strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). We now have "the testimony of our conscience,"

which we could never have by fleshly wisdom, “that in simplicity and godly sincerity . . . we have our conversation in the world.” (Sermon 12: “The Witness of Our Spirits”, § 15)

He believed that God's love for humanity is revealed and incarnate in Jesus Christ. This grace, when it is received, both communicates forgiveness and makes renewal possible. The means of grace make grace real and tangible, awakening our hearts to our need for God's love and forgiveness. And they move us toward holiness of heart and life.

As grace brings us to Christ, the means of grace keep us with Christ. Wesley saw practicing the means of grace as being essential to a disciple's continued walk with Christ. Practicing the means of grace is like breathing. They are the practices through which the Holy Spirit breathes the life of God into our hearts and minds and bodies. And, when we stop practicing we die. When the means of grace are no longer part of our life, our relationship with Christ suffers. Teaching and practicing the means of grace is how a congregation keeps its baptismal promise to every person seeking to live as a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ in the world:

Pastor: Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include *these persons* now before you in your care?

Congregation: With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround *these persons* with a community of love and forgiveness, that *they* may grow in *their* trust of God, and be found faithful in *their* service to others. We will pray for *them*, that *they* may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life. (The Baptismal Covenant I, §8, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 35)

...

Pastor: 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 Baptismal Covenant I, §16, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 38)

Learning and practicing the basic Christian practices is how Christians “work out their salvation” (Philippians 2:12-13). The means of grace are how Christ guides his disciples into life in the kingdom of God. They are how God fills Christians with divine love and teaches us how to share that love with the world.

John Wesley described the means of grace as consisting of *works of piety* and *works of mercy*. The works of piety (also known as “Instituted Means of Grace”) include private and family prayer, searching the scriptures, The Lord's Supper, the public worship of God, Christian conference, and fasting or abstinence. Today these works of piety may be described as acts of worship and acts of devotion. The

works of mercy are “prudential” means of grace such as doing no harm, avoiding evil, and doing all the good one can (see Matthew 25:31-46). Today these works of mercy may be described as acts of compassion and acts of justice.

John Wesley provides three categories that are useful for understanding the means of grace and their place in Christian life:¹

I. GENERAL MEANS OF GRACE

1. Universal obedience.
2. Keeping all the commandments.
3. Watching.
4. Denying ourselves.
5. Taking up our cross daily.
6. Exercise of the presence of God.

II. INSTITUTED (PARTICULAR) MEANS OF GRACE

1. Prayer: private, family, public; consisting of deprecation, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving; extemporaneous and written.
2. Searching the scriptures by reading, meditating, hearing, attending the ministry of the word, either read or expounded.
3. The Lord's Supper.
4. Fasting, or abstinence.
5. Christian conference, which includes both the fellowship of believers and rightly ordered conversations which minister grace to hearers.

III. PRUDENTIAL MEANS OF GRACE

1. Particular rules or acts of holy living.
2. Class and band meetings.
3. Prayer meetings, covenant services, watch night services, love feasts.
4. Visiting the sick.
5. Doing all the good one can, doing no harm.
6. Reading devotional classics and all edifying literature.

The emphasis of this six-week Bible study will be on these means of grace and their role in Christian life and formation. They are disciplines Wesley encouraged the Methodists to practice *together*. These spiritual disciplines are gifts given by God in order to help Christians to follow the teachings of Christ, summarized by him for us in Mark 12:29-31: “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 . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” They are the means by which the church makes disciples and lives as a sign community for the coming reign of God.

¹ Henry H. Knight III, *The Presence of God in the Christian Life: John Wesley and the Means of Grace*, (Netuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1992), 5.

Wesley believed “first, the Christian life is most fundamentally lived as a response to God's love for us. To know God truly is to experience that love. Second, our love for God and our neighbor are core affections, emotions, or tempers which govern the Christian life.”² The means of grace are the means to living out this love. As they are faithfully practiced, the relationships of love for God and for neighbor are nurtured. The Christian is formed as an individual and as a member the church. Through the means of grace, God's love and our love become real, tangible, and visible through lives lived in the world and the church is set free to participate with Christ in his work of redeeming planet Earth.

ABOUT THE BIBLE STUDY

Each of the six lessons invites participants to reflect together on two passages of scripture. The passages selected are those that John and Charles Wesley frequently quoted in their sermons, hymns, and writings. They will help the participants gain a deeper understanding of the dynamic of grace and the importance and role of basic Christian practices (the means of grace) in their formation as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Each lesson highlights two Christian practices: a work of piety (loving God) and a work of mercy (loving neighbors). We include both to reinforce the importance of following all the teachings of Jesus, and not only those that suit our temperament. This emphasis on balance is part of the genius and power of disciple formation in the Wesleyan tradition. It emerges from the understanding that we grow in love of God through works of piety (prayer, worship, the Lord's Supper, Bible study, and fasting). If we are paying attention to God in prayer, then God equips, empowers, and sends us into the world to love those whom God loves, as God loves them, in works of mercy (feeding hungry people, sheltering the homeless, welcoming strangers, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoners). Maintaining balance helps the Holy Spirit to heal and form our character more and more toward Christ-likeness.

We recommend you make copies of the two diagrams provided: “The Shape of Discipleship” and “The Wesleyan Way of Making Disciples of Jesus Christ.” They provide a visual depiction of the role and importance of practicing the means of grace in Christian faith and life.

The questions for reflection and discussion will work best in groups of three or four. After a time of discussion, invite the smaller groups to report to the class what they learned. You may want to have newsprint and markers on hand to record the learning, insights, comments, and questions that emerge from the conversations.

² Ibid., 18.

You do not need to use all the questions provided. Select those that you feel are most pertinent to your context. However, if you do want the group to address all the questions provided for any of the lessons, you may want to consider dividing the session into two sessions.

Allow time in each session for the participants to think about what they will do in their daily lives in response to what God is saying to them in the scriptures. The goal here is to invite participants into regular practice of the means of grace and relationships of mutual accountability and support for discipleship.

Conclude with prayer and hymn singing (all of the suggested hymns are found in *The United Methodist Hymnal*). If the group is uncomfortable with singing, then close the time with a choral reading of the hymn. Encourage the people to pay attention to the words and to carry them in their hearts as a source of encouragement and inspiration for their daily walk with Christ and one another in the world.

“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.”
John Wesley

“Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine: Glory to him from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Resources for Learning and Practicing the Means of Grace (a.k.a. Basic Christian Practices)

A Disciple's Journal: Daily Bible Reading and Guidance for Reflection
by Steven W. Manskar (Discipleship Resources, ISBN 0-88177-473-1)

Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups by Gayle Turner Watson
(Discipleship Resources, ISBN 0-88177-305-0)

This Day: A Wesleyan Way of Prayer by Laurence Hull Stookey
(Abingdon Press, ISBN 0-687-07496-7)

How Is It With Your Soul? by Denise L. Stringer
(Abingdon Press, ISBN 0-687-06697-2)

Devotional Life in the Wesleyan Tradition: A Workbook by Steve Harper
(Upper Room Books, ISBN 0-8358-0740-1)

Eight Life-Enriching Practices of United Methodists by Henry H. Knight, III
(Abingdon Press, ISBN 0-687-08734-1)

Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life by Marjorie J. Thompson
(Westminster John Knox Press, ISBN 0-664-25548-5)

*Recapturing the Wesley's Vision: An Introduction to the Faith of John and
Charles Wesley* by Paul Wesley Chilcote
(InterVarsity Press, ISBN 0-8308-2743-9)

Changed from Glory into Glory: Wesleyan Prayer for Transformation
by Paul Wesley Chilcote (Upper Room Books, ISBN 0-8358-9814-8)

Praying in the Wesleyan Spirit: 52 Prayers for Today
by Paul Wesley Chilcote (Upper Room Books, ISBN 0-8358-0950-1)

How Great A Flame: Contemporary Lessons from the Wesleyan Revival
by James C. Logan (Discipleship Resources, ISBN 0-88177-472-3)

John Wesley for the 21st Century: Set Apart for Social Witness
by John O. Gooch (Discipleship Resources, ISBN 0-88177-445-6)

Week One

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34
John 13:34-35, 14:15-17, 15:14-17

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: Prayer
Loving Neighbor: Listening

Distribute copies of the two diagrams, “The Shape of Discipleship” and “The Wesleyan Way of Making Disciples of Jesus Christ.” Using information provided in the introduction, give a brief explanation of the means of grace and their place in Christian discipleship. Be sure to emphasize that practicing the means of grace, individually and as a community, are how disciples follow Jesus’ teachings summarized in Luke 9:23 and Mark 12:29-31.

Reflection:

Now is not this love “the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10), the sum of all Christian righteousness? Of all inward righteousness; for it necessarily implies “compassion and humility” (Colossians 3:12) (seeing “love is not arrogant”, 1 Corinthians 13:4), “kindness, meekness, patience” (Colossians 3:12) (for love “is not irritable”, but “believes, hopes, endures all things”) (1 Corinthians 13:5, 7): and of all outward righteousness, for “love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Romans 13:10), either by word or deed. It cannot willingly either hurt or grieve anyone. And it is zealous of good works (Titus 2:4). Every lover of humankind, as he or she has opportunity, “works for the good of all” (Galatians 6:10), being (“without partiality and without hypocrisy”) “full of mercy and good fruits” (James 3:17).

(John Wesley, Sermon 7: “The Way to the Kingdom,” § I.6-9)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Jesus?
2. What do these commandments mean to you? How do you respond to them? What does Jesus mean here by “love”? What does the “love” Jesus is speaking about here look like? How can we express and/or make this “love” part of our lives as individuals and as a community?
3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. You may also want to look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? How do these scriptures point to a new way of life for you? What role does prayer and listening play in helping you to obey Jesus’ commandments? How does your congregation teach people how to pray? How does your congregation encourage you to be a person of prayer?

Hymn #422, “Jesus, Thine All-Victorious Love”

Comments and Questions:

Week Two

Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:1-16

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: Bible Study
Loving Neighbor: Volunteer as an ESL Tutor

Reflection:

And first let us inquire, What is salvation? The salvation which is here spoken of is not what is frequently understood by that word, the going to heaven, eternal happiness. It is not the soul's going to paradise, . . . It is not a blessing which lies on the other side of death, or (as we usually speak) in the other world. The very words of the text itself put this beyond all question. "You *are* saved." It is not something at a distance: it is a present thing, a blessing which, through the free mercy of God, ye are now in possession of. . . .

"But what good works are those, the practice of which you affirm to be necessary to sanctification?" First, all works of piety, such as public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet; receiving the Supper of the Lord; searching the Scriptures by hearing, reading, meditating; and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.

Secondly, all works of mercy, whether they relate to the bodies or souls of mortals; such as feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as the endeavoring to instruct the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, (1 Thess. 5:14) to help the tempted, (Heb. 2:18) or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. This is the repentance, and these the fruits worthy of repentance, which are necessary to full sanctification. This is the way wherein God has appointed his children to wait for complete salvation.

(John Wesley, Sermon 43: "The Scripture Way of Salvation", §1.1; III.9-10)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Paul?
2. What does “For by grace you have been saved through faith” mean to you? How do you respond to this promise? What does Paul mean here by “saved”? What does the “grace” Paul is writing about here look like? What does Paul mean by “faith”? How can we express and/or make this “saved by grace through faith” part of our lives as individuals and as a community? In Ephesians 4:1, what is the “life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”? What does such a life look like in your world, in your congregation today? Look at 4:14-16. What does Paul mean when he says, “We must no longer be children”? How are we to “grow up in every way . . .”?
3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. You may also want to look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? How does daily Bible reading and study help you respond to God’s love? As you read Paul and Wesley, why would something like volunteering your time to help an immigrant learn English help you grow in faith, hope, and love? How do these scriptures point to a new way of life for you?

Hymn: #385 “Let Us Plead for Faith Alone”

Comments and Questions:

Week Three

Scripture: Luke 9:23-25
Philippians 2:1-13

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: Worship
Loving Neighbor: Welcome Strangers

Reflection:

But what are the steps which the Scripture directs us to take, in the working out of our own salvation? The prophet Isaiah gives us a general answer touching the first steps which we are to take: "Cease to do evil; learn to do good" (Isaiah 1:16-17) . . . carefully avoid every evil word and work;. . . be zealous of good works (Titus 2:14), of works of piety, as well as works of mercy. Use family prayer, and cry to God in secret. Fast in secret, . . . "Search the Scriptures" (John 5:39); hear them in public, read them in private, and meditate therein. At every opportunity be a partaker of the Lord's Supper. Let your conversation be with the children of God, and see that it "be in grace, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6). As you have time, do good to all people, to their souls and to their bodies. And herein "be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58). It then only remains that you deny yourselves and take up your cross daily (Luke 9:23).

. . . God works in you; therefore you must work: you must be "workers together with him (2 Corinthians. 6:1)" (they are the very words of the Apostle); otherwise he will cease working. The general rule on which his gracious dispensations invariably proceed is this: "Unto him that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not," that does not improve the grace already given, "shall be taken away what he assuredly hath" (Luke 8:18) . . . Even St. Augustine, who is generally supposed to favor the contrary doctrine, makes that just remark, "*he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.*" He will not save us unless we "save ourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40); unless we ourselves "fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life" (1 Timothy. 6:12); unless we "agonize to enter in at the strait gate" (Luke 13:24), "deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily" (Luke 9:23), and labor, by every possible means, to "make our own calling and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10).

(John Wesley, Sermon 85: "On Working Out Our Salvation", §II.4: III.7)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Jesus and Paul?
2. (Luke 9:23-25) What is the cross we are to take up and bear each day? Look at the “Shape of Discipleship” diagram. What if the cross we are to take up and carry daily is obedience to the commands of Christ and being his witnesses in the world? How would this change your understanding of discipleship? How does welcoming strangers help you to “take up your cross”?

(Philippians 2:1-13) What does “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” mean to you? How do you respond to this teaching? What does Paul mean here by having the mind of Christ? How does a person learn the mind of Christ? What difference would “having the mind of Christ” make in your life? in the life of your congregation? What does Paul mean by “work out your salvation”? How are you working out your salvation? How does weekly worship help you to “work out your salvation?”

3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. You may also want to look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? What new habits or new way of thinking will your reflection on these scriptures lead you toward?

Hymn: #384 “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Comments and Questions:

Week Four

Scripture: Galatians 5:1-6
Matthew 25:31-46

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: The Lord's Supper
Loving Neighbor: Feeding Hungry People

Reflection:

In "Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision counts for anything," but "faith working through love." It first, through the energy of God, works love to God and all humankind; and by this love every holy and heavenly temper. In particular, lowliness, meekness, gentleness, temperance, and long-suffering. "It is neither circumcision," the attending on all the Christian ordinances, "nor un-circumcision," the fulfilling of all heathen morality, but "the keeping of the commandments of God;" particularly those, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself." In a word, holiness is the having "the mind that was in Christ" (Phil. 2:5), and the "walking as Christ walked" (1 John 2:6).

(John Wesley, Sermon 17: "Circumcision of the Heart" §17)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Paul and Jesus?
2. (Galatians 5:1-6) From what has Christ set us free? For what has Christ set us free? What does freedom in Christ mean to you? How do you live out the freedom Christ has given you? What “yoke of slavery” is holding you back? How can you be set free? What does “faith working through love” look like? How does faith work through love? How does the Lord’s Supper help us to grow in faith and move us towards faith working through love?

(Matthew 25:31-46) How does this parable illustrate “faith working through love”? Would you say that feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing those without clothes, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners are means of grace or “basic Christian practices”? Why or why not? What does Jesus say about those who care for poor and marginalized people? What does he have to say about those who neglect poor and marginalized people they encounter? Why? What is the connection between the church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper and feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick, and visiting prisoners?

3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. Look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? Do these scriptures point to a new way of life for you? Do you want to decide in your own mind what you will choose to do?

Hymn: #428 “For the Healing of the Nations”

Comments and Questions:

Week Five

Scripture: John 15:1-17
1 John 4:16b-21

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: Christian Conferencing
Loving Neighbor: Visiting in Prisons and Jails

Reflection:

. . . this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. "Holy solitaries" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness. "Faith working through love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. "The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4:21); and that we manifest our love "by working for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith" (Galatians 6:10). And in truth, whosoever loves their brothers and sisters, not in word only, but as Christ loved them, cannot but be "zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). They feel in their soul a burning, restless desire to spend and be spent for them. "My Father," they will say, "is still working, and I also am working" (John 5:17). And at all possible opportunities they are, like their Master, "going about doing good" (Acts 10:38).

(John Wesley, from Preface to *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Jesus and the writer of 1 John?
2. (John 15:1-17) Would you say that it is possible to be a Christian and not be part of the Church? Why or why not? How do you describe the community Jesus is talking about here? What is the fruit Jesus expects his followers to produce? How are they to produce this fruit? Who is Jesus talking about when he speaks of “those who abide in me”? What does it mean to “abide” in Jesus? What does such a life look like? How are we to “love one another?” Would you regard yourself to be a “friend” of Jesus? Why or why not? Where would you go to meet others whom Jesus would call “friends?”

(1 John 4:16b-21) How would you define the “love” described here? What image comes to mind when you read or hear this passage? What does “those who abide in love abide in God” mean to you? How does such love equip us to “have boldness on the day of judgment”? What is it about loving God that makes “loving brothers and sisters” so critical to life in God’s household? How does your congregation help you to grow in loving God by growing in loving your sisters and brother in Christ?

3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. Look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? Do these scriptures point to a new way of life for you? Do you want to decide in your own mind what you will choose to do?

Hymn: #561 “Jesus, United by Thy Grace”

Comments and Questions:

Week Six

Scripture: Matthew 5:43-48
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Basic Christian Practices: Loving God: Fasting
Loving Neighbor: *Bread for the World*
(www.bread.org)

Reflection:

What is then the perfection of which mortals are capable while they dwell in a corruptible body? It is complying with that kind command, "My child, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26). It is the "loving the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, *love*. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as they who love God love their brother and sister also, it is inseparably connected with the second, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). You shall love every one as your own soul, as Christ loved us. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40): these contain the whole of Christian perfection.

(John Wesley, Sermon 76: "On Perfection", §1.4)

Comments and Questions:

Study Questions:

1. What is the primary message you hear from these words of Jesus and Paul?
2. (Matthew 5:43-48) To be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” means that we are to cooperate with the dynamic of grace and allow God to form us completely into the human being God created us to be, in Christ; just as God is fully and completely God. It is being completely filled to overflowing with the love given to the world by God in Jesus Christ. How does practicing the means of grace help us to become “perfect in love.” Is it possible to be “perfect” without learning and practicing the means of grace (basic Christian practices)? Why or why not? How is it possible for us to forgive and love the way Jesus teaches here? How could fasting help us to grow in grace? How could feeding the hungry and working to alleviate hunger in the world help us to become perfect in love?

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-24) How is it possible to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances”? What role does practicing the means of grace play in the life Paul is describing here? Is such a life possible without the means of grace? Why or why not? What does Paul mean when he writes, “May the God of peace sanctify you entirely”? What does his promise in verse 24 mean to you? What difference does this promise make in your life? In the life of your congregation?

3. Look at the comments from John Wesley. Look at some commentaries on these passages to see what contemporary Biblical scholars have to say. How does Wesley’s interpretation of discipleship compare with yours? How does his thinking compare with contemporary scholars and leaders?
4. How will these reflections influence how you respond to God’s love? Do these scriptures point to a new way of life for you? Do you want to decide in your own mind what you will choose to do?

Hymn: #417 “O For a Heart to Praise My God”

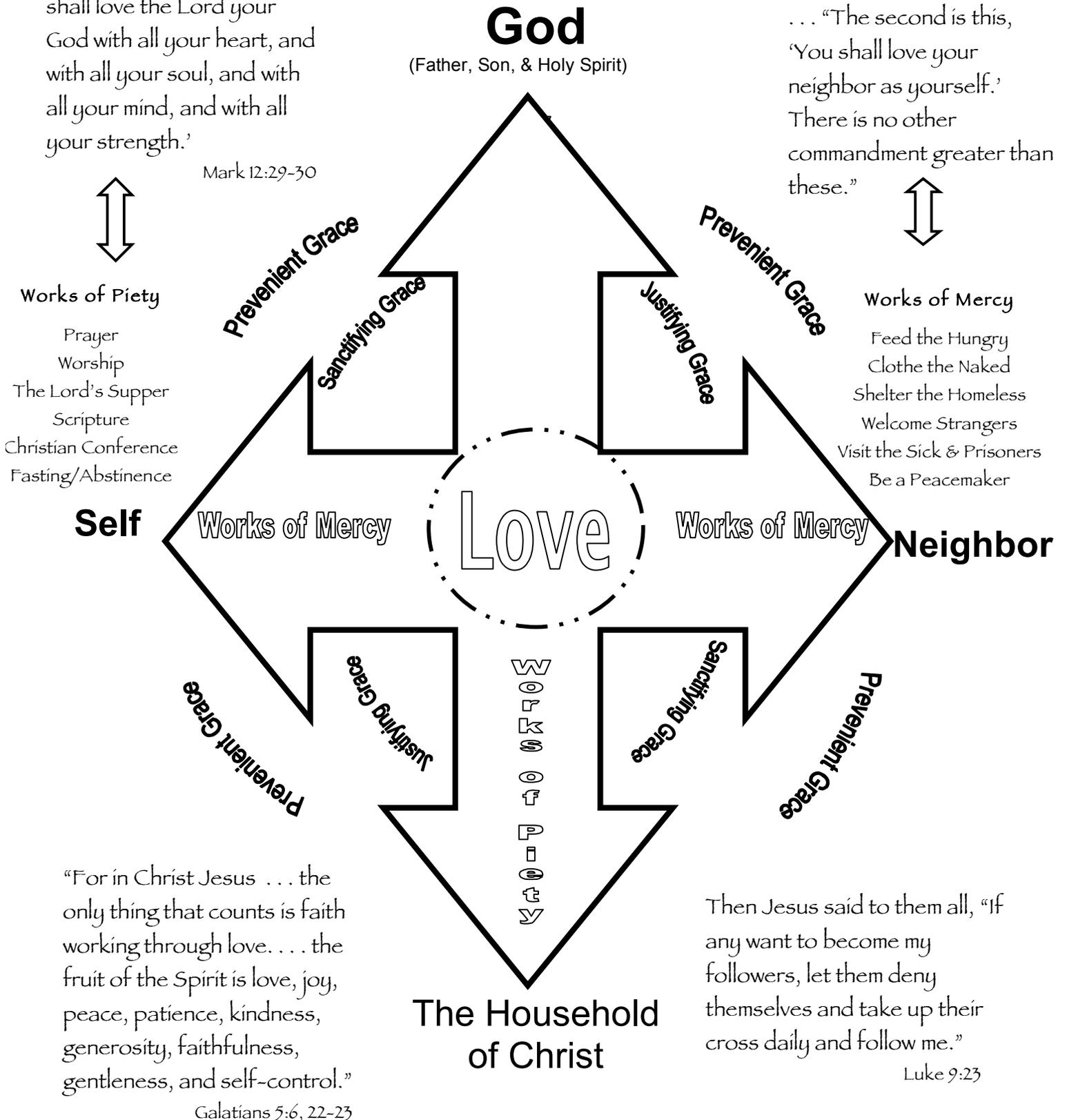
Comments and Questions:

THE SHAPE OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus answered, "... 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.'

Mark 12:29-30

... "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."



"For in Christ Jesus ... the only thing that counts is faith working through love. ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

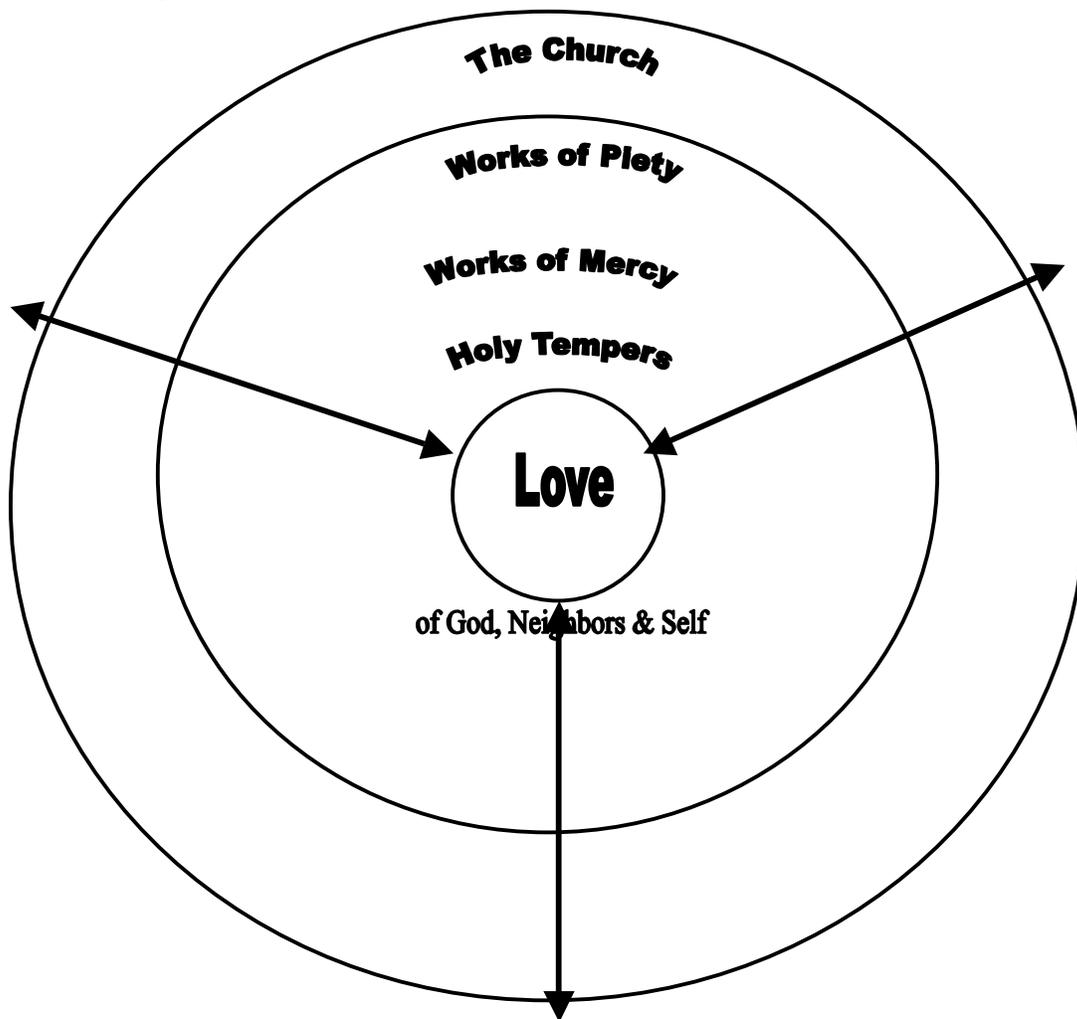
Galatians 5:6, 22-23

Then Jesus said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

THE WESLEYAN WAY OF MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST

“In a Christian believer **love** sits upon the throne, which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and [all people], 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—and if any other is comprised in 'the mind which was in Christ Jesus'. In an exterior circle are all the **works of mercy**, whether to the souls or bodies of [all people]. 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.” *from Sermon 92: On Zeal, § 11.5*



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