



Agros: Find, Train, Support Pulpit Supply Team “Ordinary Means, Extraordinary Aims” Sermon Series

Introduction

Jesus once said, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.” (Matt. 13:44) The supreme treasure of the heavenly kingdom is the grace of the Heavenly King. And like all the treasures, that grace is hidden from the “wise and understanding” and revealed to “little children” (Matt. 11:25). God has hidden his grace in places too ordinary for the wise and understanding to find them. But they’re not too ordinary for his little children, for his churches. Churches that humbly treasure the grace of God are extraordinarily devoted to the ordinary means of grace.¹ This 8-week sermon series is an exhortation for churches to refresh and deepen their devotion to those ordinary means of grace. Our prayer is that the preaching of these truths will form in these churches a conscious rejection of pragmatically pursuing worldly success and wholeheartedly embracing the ordinary means in which heavenly grace has been hidden.

Members of the pulpit supply team will use this guide to coordinate their preparation. Each member should read the entire document to sharpen the focus of their own sermon and prevent redundancy with others. Since we aim to preach expositional sermons, please choose only one of the suggested passages for your sermon text. Other passages can certainly be used as cross-references. Broadly speaking, the series begins with exhortations to the ordinary *means* of grace and ends with encouragements toward the *aims* of grace, or in other words: *how* we receive grace and *why* we pursue grace.

Week 1: “Ordinary Church – Extraordinary Devotion”

- Role in the series: An introductory survey of the ordinary means of grace
- Potential passages: Acts 2:42-47
- Commended applications:
 - Help your listeners see the grace flowing through devotion to these intangible realities: The Word, prayer, fellowship, and the ordinances. Introduce them to the idea that the church is not something man creates. It is something that God’s grace creates and man only responds in faithful devotion to the means of that grace. Help them see that tangible results are not something we control. We simply control what we are devoted to: either God’s means of grace, or our own human means of effort/wisdom. And as we choose the former, we can trust God’s grace to produce the results that he wants.
 - Help them see that this definition of church contradicts other worldly definitions: a gathering of at least 150 people, a building where I grew up going to church, a traditional form of worship service, a sensational form of worship service. We want to identify wrong definitions of church that this passage exhorts us away from.

Week 2: “Extraordinary Devotion to the Word”

- Role in the series: Exhorting devotion to the Word of God as a means of grace
- Potential passages: Psa. 119:105-112; Jer. 42:1-6; Isa. 66:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:1-5
- Commended applications:

¹ See the article at the end of this document for a fuller description and defense of the centrality of the “ordinary means of grace” in the gathering of the church.

- Be a church supremely devoted to and contented with the true preaching of the Word of God. Let music, children's ministry, atmosphere, and technology all matter less than what happens behind the pulpit. Reject any and all forms of pragmatism—never tolerate disobedience for expedience. Two or three gathered in his name is always better than two or three hundred gathered by their own methods and for their own reasons.
- Be a church devoted to the biblical qualities of a pastor (devoted to the Word in character and in ministry) and reject worldly qualities (entertaining, inspiring, handsome, dynamic, enthusiastic)

Week 3: “Extraordinary Devotion to Prayer”

- Role in the series: Exhorting devotion to corporate prayer as a means of grace
- Potential passages: Dan. 6:6-15; Acts 4:23-31; Jam. 5:13-18
- Commended applications:
 - Be a church whose ordinary prayer meetings are attended earnestly and regularly. Let the lack of activity and busyness train your hearts to seek the power of God's grace that human strength can never achieve. Let your corporate prayers be full of heavenly priorities instead of only personal, individualistic, materialistic concerns.

Week 4: “Extraordinary Devotion to Fellowship”

- Role in the series: Exhorting devotion to fellowship as a means of grace
- Potential passages: Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Thess. 2:7-13; Heb. 3:12-13
- Commended applications:
 - Be a church who capitalizes on the grace of personal, gospel-based fellowship. Let your conversations with one another throughout the week be rich with the Word of God and spiritual priorities. Show hospitality to one another. Deliberately disciple one another. Sing in such a way that the voices of your church exhort you rather than a professional entertaining you.
 - Be wary of “affinity-based community”² and its shallow relationships. Warn against the false promises of busy, programmatic, impersonal, event-based ministry. Reject the competing priorities of maximizing attendance, social media presence, or building improvements.

Week 5: “Extraordinary Devotion to the Ordinances”

- Role in the series: Exhorting devotion to the right use of the ordinances as a means of grace
- Potential passages: Matt. 18:15-20; Rom. 6:1-4; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 1 Cor. 10:14-22; 1 Cor. 11:23-34; 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Col. 2:6-15
- Commended applications:
 - Be a church who understands the necessity of and grace in meaningful church membership. Show how the ordinances, when used rightly, make the loving distinction between insiders and outsiders clear.
 - Warn against the temptation to suppress the importance of these ordinances to increase attendance or to keep from offending people.

Week 6: “Extraordinary Aim: Maturity of God's Church”

- Role in the series: Drive the ordinary means of grace with the extraordinary aim of the church's maturity in godliness, doctrine, and love for one another
- Potential passages: Eze. 36:22-28; Rom. 12:1-21; Eph. 4:11-16; Heb. 5:11-6:3; Tit. 3:3-8

² This concept is explained in detail in *The Compelling Community* by Mark Dever and Jamie Dunlop.

- Commended applications:
 - Be a church who measures your success by invisible things, such as the progress of sanctification in one another's lives, the joy in trials, the growing love for one another, the broader and deeper knowledge of the truth.
 - Reject the temptation to measure your church's success with only empirical evidence: attendance, budget, building, etc. This is common even in small churches. People's attachments to their building goes deeper than they realize. Help them see that merely aiming to keep their building open with a weekly meeting in it is not the extraordinary aim of grace. We want their hearts free to leave their building and join another church if that's what will help them pursue the maturity of God's Church.

Week 7: "Extraordinary Aim: Multiplication of God's Church"

- Role in the series: Drive the ordinary means of grace with the extraordinary aim of the multiplication of churches
- Potential passage(s): Acts 11:19-26; 1 Cor. 14:20-25
- Commended applications:
 - Be a church who loves and supports and prays for the multiplication of other true churches. Rather than exclusively focusing on the multiplication of your church's attendance, seek the multiplication of entire churches devoted to these ordinary means of grace around you and around the world.
 - Demonstrate how easily churches who are devoted to these ordinary things can multiply (doesn't require academic degrees, massive buildings, enormous finances, dynamic personalities). Jesus said that a gathering of two or three in his name have all the rights and privileges of a church.
 - Demonstrate how a church that emphasizes personal evangelism over big events is more intelligible and compelling to a non-Christian society than our previously Christianized one.

Week 8: "Extraordinary Aim: Magnification of God's Grace"

- Role in the series: Drive the ordinary means of grace with the superlative aim of the magnification of God's glorious grace
- Potential passage(s): 1 Cor. 1:18-31; Eph. 3:14-21
- Commended applications:
 - Be a church who will live or die to magnify the grace of God. Let that be the all-consuming and highest aim of your existence and ministry. Let it drive your devotion to all the ordinary means of grace, even when the results are costly and painful.

“Why the Ordinary Means of Grace Must Be Central in Our Gatherings”³

7/27/2021

By David Strain

The Westminster Shorter Catechism provides as helpful a definition as any of the means of grace:

The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption are his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation. (Question 88)

All the ordinances of God, but especially the Word read and preached, the sacraments of baptism and the Supper, and the prayers of the people of God: these are the outward and ordinary means Christ uses to impart the blessings of the gospel to his people by the Holy Spirit. And I daresay that every evangelical would agree that these are the constituent elements of Christian worship, commanded by Scripture, and normative for the church.

To be sure, some of us might quibble over the language here or there. Some dislike the word “sacraments.” Some worry that calling these ordinances of God “means of grace” might convey the mistaken idea that simply in the performance of these outward acts grace is conferred (which is not at all what the phrase intends). But these differences aside, the Word of God read and preached, prayed and sung, seen in baptism and tasted in the Lord’s Supper—all agree that these are the fundamentals of Christian worship. They are the primary mechanisms given to us for our discipleship. So far, so good.

It remains, however, a perennially pressing question as to what role these elements ought to play in any given Sunday service. Certainly, they ought to feature regularly in the life of the church. But can’t we do other things too? Can’t we set aside some part or other of these ordinary means, in favor of something special once in a while?

Perhaps the simplest way to respond to these challenges is to parse the phrase “ordinary means of grace.”

1. Ordinary means ordained.

Calling the means of grace “ordinary” teaches us two things. First, these means are appointed. They are “ordinary,” in the sense of having been *ordained* by God in Holy Scripture. That’s why the catechism calls them “ordinances.” The classic text for this assertion is Acts 2:42, where we read of the post-Pentecostal church that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

When we ask what Christians should do when they gather in churches on the first day of the week, Scripture has answers for us: reading the Bible, preaching the gospel, praying, singing, and observing baptism and the Supper. That’s what we should do. That’s it. When Paul wrote to Timothy, to encourage him in his new pastorate at Ephesus, his Ministry 101 refresher course is remarkably clear. As contemporary evangelicals, we are often prone to measuring church vitality by the Three Bs: buildings, bodies, and budgets. That’s how we know things are going well. But Paul wants Timothy focused elsewhere.

Listen to his counsel to the young pastor:

³ Originally published at <https://www.9marks.org/article/why-the-ordinary-means-of-grace-must-be-central-in-our-gatherings/>

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:1–5)

Timothy faces mounting pressure to give people what they prefer, what sits more easily with them, what they enjoy. Paul presses him in the opposite direction. He tells Timothy to remain resolute in giving people what they *need*. In other words, he needs to preach the Word. The central means appointed by God for the gathering-in of the lost and the growing-up of the found is the preaching of the Word. It's not flashy. It's not novel. But it is what God has ordained.

So pastors, just do that. It might be harder (notice that Timothy is to “endure suffering” as he does the “work of an evangelist”!). It might result in slower measurable growth in your buildings, bodies, and budgets. But it is God's way, so it must be ours.

2. Ordinary means *not* extraordinary.

Secondly, the word ordinary needs to be set in contrast to its antonym: *extraordinary*. To be sure, God regularly made use of many extraordinary means to impart his grace to his people. All of the miracles and revelatory gifts were extraordinary. And fidelity to Scripture compels us to maintain that God remains free to work as he wills.

But surely, we ought never to neglect the *ordinary* means while we look expectantly for him to work through the *extraordinary*. The context of Acts 2:42 is once again important here. If ever there was an unusual and extraordinary season in the life of the church, this was it. But what characterizes the newly Spirit-empowered church in the grip of what we might today recognize as a remarkable revival? Well, it's *not* an obsession with the new and the unusual and the innovative and the extraordinary. No, the church is devoted to the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. There is not chaos. There is clarity. The Word of God was mighty in their midst and the people responded in prayer and praise. There is no smoke and mirrors, no gimmicks or pizzazz, no central personality or rock-star leader. The Word did the work.

3. Remember: they are a means of *grace*.

Finally, we need to remember that our worship services ought to focus on the ordinary means of grace not only because they are *ordinary*, but also because they are a means of *grace*. In my judgment, the best way to understand how the Word, the sacraments, and prayer communicate to us the saving grace of Christ, is to focus on the way the Word works. Hebrews 4:2 speaks of the fathers of Israel who derived no benefit from the Word preached because it was “unmixed with faith” or, as some versions have it, because they were not joined by faith to those who believed the Word. Either way, the point is the same: benefitting from the Word requires faith. Faith takes hold of the grace on offer in the Word.

The sacraments are “visible words,” as Calvin said, echoing Augustine. And they work in the same way. We receive them, believing the gospel they depict—and by believing, we receive the grace they offer. Similarly, prayer takes God at his promise and offers up “our desires unto God for things agreeable to his Word” (Westminster Shorter Catechism 98). Prayer is a pleading of the promises of the Word back to God. But the *Word* is the main thing.

And when we put the main thing at the heart of all we do, we put ourselves on the road toward blessing, toward the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So why would we look elsewhere when we know that God has promised to meet us here, in the Word, in the sacraments, and in prayer?

So then, when we gather, let's not mess around with our own homespun techniques. In faith, let us read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word, sing the Word, and see and taste and touch the Word. As we do, surely the grace promised in the Word will be ours to the glory of the Triune God.