

# People as Means of Grace

by J.R. Miller

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*People become means of grace to us through their influence, teaching, and association, helping us to grow in Christ and become more like Him.*

**Scripture:** Proverbs 27:17, Matthew 18:20, Romans 12:10, 1 Corinthians 15:33, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:29, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:24-25, James 5:16

**Topics:** "Means of Grace", "Community"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes that people serve as vital means of grace in our spiritual growth, illustrating this with the transformation of Indian children through Christian influence. He argues that while traditional means of grace like prayer and Bible reading are important, the interactions and relationships we have with others are equally significant in shaping our character and faith. Miller highlights that both the good and the challenging aspects of our relationships can teach us valuable lessons about patience, love, and self-control. He concludes that living in community is essential for spiritual development, as it compels us to practice unselfishness and draw closer to God through the lives of others. Ultimately, every encounter can be a divine opportunity for growth and grace.

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## Transcript

"As iron sharpens iron--so one man sharpens another." Proverbs 27:17

There are pairs of pictures which show some Indian children:

first--as they appeared when they came fresh from their barbarism, with the dress and all other marks of their savage state;

then--as they appeared after a time in the school, so transformed as to dress, expression of face and entire bearing--as to be well-near, if not altogether, unrecognizable.

The change was wrought by the influences of Christian training and civilization, by contact with the lives of the men and women with whom they were associated as teachers and friends. It is not alone the instruction they have received that has so transformed these children of barbarism: it is the touch upon them of refined life and character. The blessing came to them not through books alone--not even through the Bible directly--but through other human lives which have themselves been leavened with the gentle and beautiful spirit of Jesus Christ.

We call prayer, Bible-reading, the Lord's Supper, and certain other specifically religious exercises, means of grace--but our list is quite too short. Anything that helps to interpret Christ to us, and to bring us into closer relations with him; anything that becomes to us a disciplinary experience, drawing out and strengthening our life in any of its elements; anything that makes us better, holier, sweeter in spirit--is to us a means of grace.

Under this head, therefore, we may put work, which develops our powers; the struggle with trial and temptation, through which our natures are disciplined; the enduring of sorrow and pain, by which we are made more pure; and all experiences of life which result, or are designed to result, in the growth of our spiritual life.

Among other means of grace--we must put our association with other people. In contact of life with life--we are impressed, wrought upon, and influenced. Indeed, we receive the larger portion of our divine gifts--through human hearts and lives. We sometimes overlook this, and think of God as reaching down his mercies to us directly and immediately, without the intervention of mediators. But closer thought shows us that ordinarily this is not the way our spiritual good things come to us. Ordinarily, God passes his gifts to us--through others.

The Incarnation is the largest illustration of this truth. When God desired to reveal himself to men, he did not come down in flaming glory like Sinai's--the dazzling splendor would have blinded men's eyes--but he manifested himself in a sweet and beautiful life. In human form, Christ could come close to sinful men--without awing or alarming them; and when they touched him, grace flowed from his lips and life to bless them.

What was true of this largest of all manifestations, is true in lesser ways of all God's revealings. He does not open a window in heaven, that we may look in and see his face. Even Christ does not come down and walk again upon our streets--that we may see him as the disciples saw him. He makes himself known to us--in and through the lives of others. Even as in a dewdrop quivering on leaf or grass-blade, on a summer's morning--one can see the whole expanse of the blue sky--so in the lowliest life of a true believer, there is a mirroring, though dim and imperfect, of the brightness of God's glory. Thus God reveals his love to a child--through the love of the mother. Human parenthood is a little mirror in which the child sees reflected a vision of divine beauty. Thus the mother is the first means of grace to her child; she is the earliest interpreter to it--of God's love and tenderness, of God's thoughtfulness and care, of God's holiness and authority.

The child is also a means of grace to the parent. Parents are set to train their children, to teach them about God and their duty, and to build them up in character. But, while parents strive to do this sacred work for their children--the children in turn become teachers to their parents. A devout father and mother learn more of the love of God and of God's fatherhood, as they bend over their first-born child or hold it in their arms--than ever they had learned before from teachers and from books--even from the Bible. Their own feelings toward their child--interpret God's feelings toward them; as their hearts warm toward their offspring and are thrilled with holy affection--they learn how the heart of the heavenly Father warms toward them and is thrilled with tenderness and yearning as he looks upon them.

In other ways, too, is a child a means of grace to its parents. Jesus set a little child in the midst of his disciples and bade them learn from it--the lessons of humility and simplicity. Every child that grows up in a true home--is a constant teacher, and its opening life, like a rosebud in its unfolding, pours beauty and

sweetness all about. Many a home has been transformed, by the unconscious ministry of a little child.

Children are means of grace to parents, also, in the very care and concern which they cause. They are troubles as well as comforts. We have to work the harder to make provision for them; we have to deny ourselves when they come, and begin to live for them. They cost us many anxieties, too: sleepless nights, oftentimes, when they are sick; days of weariness when a thousand things have to be done for them. Then we have to plan for them and think of their education and training, and we have to teach them and look to the formation of their habits. In many cases, too, they cause sore anxiety and distress of heart--by their waywardness and by our apprehension that they may not turn out well. In many homes--the sorrow over the living is greater far than that for the dead who have passed to sweet rest.

Yet it is in these very experiences, that our children become especially means of grace to us. We learn lessons of patience in our constant care for them. We are trained to unselfishness as, under the strong pressure of love, we are all the while denying ourselves and making personal sacrifices for them, doing all manner of serving for them. We are trained to gentler, softer moods--as we witness their sufferings, and as our hearts are pained by our anxieties on their behalf. Our distress--as we watch them in their struggles and temptations and are grieved by their heedlessness and waywardness, works its rich discipline in our own lives, teaching us compassion and faith as we cry to God for them. There really are no such growing-times in the lives of true Christian parents--as when they are bringing up their children.

But not only are children thus means of grace to parents--the same is true of all lives in their influence one upon another. We learn many of our best lessons--from our associations with our fellow-men. Every fragment of moral beauty in a regenerated life--is a mirroring of a little fragment, at least, of the image of God on which our eyes may gaze. Every true Christian life is in an imperfect degree, and yet truly, a new incarnation: "Christ lives in me." We cannot live with God--but we are permitted to live in very close and intimate relations with people who bear something of God's likeness.

The good and the holy are therefore means of grace to us, because they help to interpret to us the character and the will of God. In sympathetic fellowship with them--we are made conversant with holiness in actual life, brought down out of the holy Book, and incarnated before our eyes--and the effect is to produce like holiness in ourselves.

If living in direct spiritual communion with God is too high an experience for us--the next stage of privilege is living with others who are in constant fellowship with him. Converse with those who lie in Christ's bosom, and know the secret of the Lord--cannot but greatly enrich our own knowledge of divine things and elevate the tone of our own lives--as we admire the purity, the truth, the goodness we see in them, and seek to attain these qualities for ourselves! One of the richest means of spiritual culture, therefore, is association with those whose lives are Christlike, and the study of the biographies of the good and the holy, who have gone from earth.

Then, even the faults and the infirmities of those with whom we come in contact--may become to us means of grace. It is harder to live with disagreeable people--than with those who are congenial; but the very hardness may become a discipline to us--and help to develop in us the grace of patience. Association with quarrelsome, quick-tempered people--may train us to self-control in speech, teaching us either to be silent under provocation, or to give only the soft answer which turns away wrath.

Socrates had a wife--Xantippe--who, if history does not defame her, had a most violent temper. Socrates said he married her and endured her--for self-discipline. No doubt his wife's temper was a means of

cultivating self-control in him, and anyone who may be similarly unfortunate in life's close associations, should strive to use his misfortune as a means of gaining a full and complete conquest over himself. Thus even the evil in others--may be made to yield its good and its blessings to us--if only we rise to our opportunity.

Thus on all sides we find people to be means of grace to us. From the good and the saintly--we get inspirations toward better things and are lifted up imperceptibly toward goodness and saintliness. From the gentle and the loving--we receive softening influences which melt our hard, cold winter into the genial glow of summer. From the rude and the quarrelsome, we get self-discipline in our continued effort, so far as in us lies, to live peaceably with them despite their disagreeableness and their disposition to contention. Friction polishes not only metals--but characters also! Iron sharpens iron; life sharpens life. People are means of grace to us.

We grow best, therefore, as Christians, in our true places in associated life. Solitariness is not good; in the broader as well as in the narrower sense--it is not good for man to be alone. Every life needs solitude at times; we should all get into each of our busy days an hour of silence when human presences shall be shut away--by the veil that shuts us in alone with God. We need such hours for quiet thought, for communion with Christ, for self-examination, for spiritual feeding, for the drawing of blessing and holy influences down from heaven to replenish the waste produced by earth's toil, struggle and sorrow. There is a time for being alone--but we should not seek to live always nor usually in this way. Life in solitude grows selfish! The weeds of evil desire and unhealthy emotion, flourish in solitariness.

We need to live among people, that the best things in our lives, may be drawn out in thought and care and service for others. It is by no means a good thing for us to live in such circumstances that we are not required to think of others, to make self-denials for others, and to live for others, not for ourselves. The greater and more constant the pressure toward unselfishness, toward looking out and not in, and lending a hand, the better for the true growth and development of our lives. We never become unselfish, except under conditions that compel us to live unselfishly.

If we live--as we may live--with heart and life open to every good influence, we get some blessing, some inspiration, some warning, some touch of beauty, some new drawing out of Christian graces, some fresh uplift--from every person we meet, even most casually. There is no life with which we come in contact--which may not bring us some message from God--or by its very faults and infirmities help to discipline us into stronger, calmer, deeper, truer life--and thus become a means of grace to us!

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