

**Leviticus 11:45**

**Phil. 3:10-16; 2 Cor. 5:21**

**Matthew 5:46-48**

The Wesleyan Way III

**Sanctification - "Going on to Perfection"**

Last week I spoke of the vital Christian doctrine of justification. Justification means that although we're sinners, God does not condemn us. God offers to redeem the sinner from the fate he deserves, because Christ Jesus suffered for him. God is not deceived about our sinful character, but forgives us nonetheless when we place our trust in Christ's offering on our behalf. This we call "justifying grace;" a grace we can receive or refuse. Yet when we receive this pardon offered by God, we have stepped over the threshold and into God's house. It is the first step of a new life. Recall that prior to this moment it was God's "prevenient grace" that was at work in us to quicken our hearts to realize just how broad and deep is our sin, and our need for God's grace to be released from sin's bondage.

Now add to prevenient and justifying grace what Wesleyans call "sanctifying grace." This is about **completing the work begun in justification**. It is the work of Christ within us to restore the broken image of God that was there before sin entered in. Methodist theologian Albert Outler said, "Justification is what God does *for* us; sanctification is what God does *in* us."<sup>1</sup>

### **New Birth and Regeneration**

Concurrent with the event of God forgiving our sin, is the gift of new birth. I spoke of this last week. The moment we are justified by the grace of God through the redemption we have in Jesus we are also "born of the Spirit." **Being "born again" jump-starts in us the renewal of God's moral image** that was twisted and perverted by sin.

This renewal is also called "regeneration" – the actual restoration of the image of God, by divine grace, and our God-given ability to love God above all else. Outler continues, "We have no part in our own justification before God, save the passive act of accepting and trusting the merits of Christ. But we do have a crucial part to play in the further business to 'grow up in him who is our head.'"<sup>2</sup> This growing up is what we call sanctification – holiness.

### **Sanctification**

John Wesley believed that God had raised up the people called Methodists to claim and proclaim the scriptural call to holiness. God's call to holiness is found in many instances in both Old and New Testaments. Jesus reminds his followers: **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect, Matt. 5:48**. In his sermon "Original Sin" Wesley wrote, "Ye know that the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God, to repair that total loss of righteousness and true holiness which we sustained by the sin of our first parent."<sup>3</sup> The sin spoken of here is not wrong doing, it is wrong *being*. **Wrong doing is the result of wrong being** for good fruit does not come from a rotten tree. Since we have been justified in Christ, have been born anew, we must now make our life congruent with our new being. Sanctification, holiness, Christian perfection are interchangeable terms for what God does in us: **we are made holy with the new birth** – initial sanctification – **and we are transformed until we are completely holy**.

Critics will say "How can this be. Nobody's perfect." Yet the Wesleyan Christian replies, "Who says? And why not?" Since Scripture is clear that God calls us to that, and since Christ has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us, then why shouldn't we be about seeking holiness or perfection? Why shouldn't we cooperate with the Holy Spirit to renew in us the power to resist temptation, even as Christ himself did? Wesley chose as his verse for preaching his sermon on "Christian Perfection" (1759), **Philippians 3:12**. That verse reads: **Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...** He chose it

precisely because he knew that sanctification was a process – in most cases a life-long process. Let's look at what Wesleyanism says about perfection.

### What Christian Perfection Is Not

- **Christian perfection is not freedom from ignorance.** Sanctifying grace does not make us as wise as God or robots of God. There is much that is not given us to know in this life. We will be limited in our wisdom and understanding, though we can grow in these. Read Proverbs daily to gain wisdom.
- **Christian perfection is not freedom from error.** This includes interpretation of Scripture. That Christians may have differences of opinion on verses of holy writ is not proof that they are not children of God on either side, nor is it proof that Scripture is wrong. Nevertheless, Wesley was clear (as we should be) that “the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential for salvation.”<sup>4</sup> There can be no excuse for any notion that we don't know enough to be saved or to live a holy life – Scripture makes this plain.
- **Christian perfection is not freedom from infirmities.** This does not mean moral failures or addictions – these are things to repent of. Rather infirmities refer to “all those inward and outward imperfections which are not of a moral nature.”<sup>5</sup> Things like physical or mental disabilities.
- **Christian perfection is not freedom from temptations.** This should be obvious since Christ lived a perfect life in loving God with all his will and might and obeying God at all costs. Yet he was tempted. Still, he did not yield to temptation. Nevertheless, sanctification transforms us so that we take on more and more of the moral character of Christ and so are able to resist more and more temptations.

### What Perfection Is

The new birth (being “born again”) in Christ is the starting point of growing to perfection. As our physical birth is the momentous beginning of our physical life on earth, so our new life in Christ is the beginning of spiritual life, that matures our souls.<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, in his sermon “New Birth” describes it like this: “It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is ‘created anew in Christ Jesus.’”<sup>7</sup> ... **Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!** 2 Cor. 5:17.

Sanctification is a **total** response to Jesus' call: **Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,** Matt. 11:29. Sanctification relies on the promise of Jesus: **No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me,** John 15:4. God does not say “I saved you from sin, now get with it and be sinless!” Rather, God saves us and then continues to be in us to live up to the fullness of our salvation. **Sanctification is a moving process aimed to make true in our lives what God has declared in our pardon from sin.** Our *status*, in relation to God through Jesus Christ, is that of new persons with God's image regenerated within – this is justification and new birth. Now our *condition*, the actual life we live, must be brought into line with our status. This is sanctification.

It is a life and death proposition. As Oswald Chambers wrote: “The Spirit of God in the process of sanctification will strip me until I am nothing but ‘myself,’ that is the place of death. Am I willing to strip myself of all accomplishments, achievements, accolades, what people think of me, what I think of myself, and to hand that simply naked self over to God?”<sup>8</sup> In those moments that I do, He sanctifies me wholly. It's not so much something Jesus Christ puts into me; as it is Himself in me. **Remain in me, as I also remain in you,** John 15:4.

Sanctification is **Christ in you.** It is His life, His patience, His love, His holiness, His faith, His purity, His godliness, that lives through you. It is not drawing from the Holy Spirit the power to be holy; rather, it is letting the Holy Spirit dwell in you to manifest the life of Jesus. God's life in us expresses itself as God's life, not as human life trying to be godly.

For most of us this is a life-long process to ... *mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* Eph. 4:13; ...*until Christ is formed in you,* Galatians 4:19. I used to think of it as a process

of slowly diluting sin in my life – like pouring clear water into muddy until it becomes mostly clear. Here’s another way to think of sanctifying grace: stepping out of darkness and shadow and walking in the light. In those moments in the light, I am sanctified, and as I mature in Christ, the time I spend in the light becomes greater and greater, until there is no darkness at all.

### **What Difference Does It Make?**

Sanctifying grace gives us power over sin. *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, Romans 6:11.* No longer are we slaves to sin – and all our passions, desires, and lusts. Sin may still lurk within but it no longer reigns in our hearts. Always remember that the power of Christ is greater than the power of sin. *For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God’s will that you should be sanctified...1 Thess. 4:2-5.*

Sanctifying grace equips us for ministry. To be holy means to be set apart – set apart from the usual works of the world for service to God. Though our very best actions to do good are filthy rags compared to God’s purity and holiness, we can still be one with Him in motive. Sanctifying grace, God working in us, makes it possible for us to do truly good things ... *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose, Phil. 2:13.*

Oswald Chambers says it like this: “Christian character is not good doing, but Godlikeness: If the Spirit of God has transformed you within, you will exhibit Divine characteristics in your life, not good human characteristics.”<sup>9</sup>

Sanctifying grace gives us an experience in which we can grow. Again, let me borrow from the thought of Maxie Dunnam: Most Wesleyan Christians do not exhibit “sinless perfection.” That’s not a phrase Wesley ever used. To be sure, we expect Christians not to commit willful sins ... deliberately choosing to disobey God’s will, knowingly engaging in evil. Yet, the impulse and power of sin are still, and ever present, within us. But in Christ it no longer prevails in our lives. We can confidently continue to pray “take away my bent to sinning” while exercising our spirit daily with repentance, renewal of our trust in Christ, and acts of love toward others.<sup>10</sup> In hope we can appeal to God our Father as Charles Wesley’s hymn expresses - “Finish, then, thy new creation; Pure and spotless let us be. Let us see thy great salvation Perfectly restored in thee...”<sup>11</sup>

***For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do, Eph. 2:10.***

---

<sup>1</sup> Albert Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1975), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley sermon “Original Sin,” III.5, 1759.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley sermon, “Christian Perfection,” I.4, 1759.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, I.7.

<sup>6</sup> Maxie Dunnam, *Going On To Salvation, A Study of Wesleyan Beliefs* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 51.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, sermon “New Birth, II.5, 1760.

<sup>8</sup> Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, (Barbour Pub. 1963), July 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, September 20.

<sup>10</sup> Dunnam, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.