

Psalm 19:7-10
Philippians 3:12-16

November 1, 2020

Saints and Perfection
All Saints Day

Today we're marking All Saints day – kind of like the Christian Memorial Day – to remember those believers who have gone before us. Some we knew. Some we only know through history. What makes a saint? Saints really are those who put themselves at God's disposal. Those who serve the Lord are not the ones who work very hard at projects they believe God needs done, then inwardly say, "See, Lord, all that I'm doing for you. I sure hope you appreciate it." No, the real servants of the Lord are those who make themselves available to God's plans and purposes. That puts them on the road of sanctification.

None began as holy or pious people. Saints of God all begin like you and me: admitting our broken sinful condition that can only be redeemed by God's grace. *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption, 1 Cor. 1:30.* You are not a Christian because you are a good person, or a church member, or have memorized Bible verses, or because your father was a preacher and your mother was a Sunday School teacher. You are a Christian because you received salvation through Jesus. God alone is the source of our salvation. We contribute nothing but the sin that makes it necessary to be saved. God does the rest. If we believe this, then our boast will be in the Lord alone.

The Threshold

Each of us begins the journey of sanctification through the threshold of new birth in Christ. That is what God does for us. Reshaping our sinful dispositions into holy dispositions is what God does in us. The replacing of the old with the new is the work the Holy Spirit continues, to bring us to a perfect relationship with God. Most Christians accept that heaven is the place where the total presence of God is experienced, in all His holiness, purity, and perfection. They expect to be made perfect at death. Knowing this, too many Christians stop at the threshold of faith, receiving Christ's salvation grace – forgiveness of sin – but delaying perfection to life after death. Few, except John Wesley, envisioned perfection as a realistic possibility in this life. Yet that is what sainthood and sanctification is all about.

When Wesley encouraged the Methodists to "go on to perfection" and to "expect to be made perfect in love in this life," many heard this as fostering self-righteousness, works-righteousness, and spiritual pride. Who can be perfect? Only God is perfect, how can any humans reach such a status? Saying "nobody's perfect" is most often an excuse for failing to seek betterment at the hands of God. It is too often an excuse to remain content in one's imperfections

and recurring sins, thinking “by and by, when I get to heaven, I’ll be made holy.” Wesley and his followers understood Christian perfection (in this life) not as spiritual elitism but as the never-ending aspiration for all of love’s perfecting fullness. This distinctive emphasis of the Methodist expression of Christianity has profound and far-reaching implications for personal ethics and for social transformation.

Christian Perfection

St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippian Christians: *Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect* – acknowledging that he’s not perfect. But then he says: *Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded* – speaking as though he and others were perfect. What does he mean? In 1741 John Wesley published his sermon “Christian Perfection” (at the urging of Bishop Edmund Gibson who told him to “publish it to all the world”), in which he outlined his teaching on the Scriptures concerning the perfection of believers. Drawing from Paul’s letter to the Philippians: first, he wrote, in what sense Christians are not perfect; then in what sense Christians are perfect.

Scripture and experience show us that Christians are not perfect in knowledge nor free from ignorance in this life. We may know the general truths God has revealed, we may know the mighty working of God’s spirit in our hearts and the assurance of salvation in Christ. But touching the Almighty Himself, we cannot search Him out to perfection. *And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?* Job 26:14. Nor can we know when Christ will return to bring His kingdom in fullness, nor how the three that bear witness in Heaven, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are nevertheless One. The Christian can know what is essential for salvation (see 1 John 2:20-21) yet still make mistakes regarding other matters.

The Christian can err in believing some facts to be quite different from what in truth they were. Time can correct our errors and that is why studying human history is so important.

The Christian is not perfect so as to be free of infirmities. [This does not mean infirmity as a moral choice as in the sense one can say, “Everyone has their infirmity and mine is swearing ... or drunkenness ... or lust.” These are not infirmities but sins; moral failures that if not repented of will lead one to hell.] Infirmities are bodily imperfections, outward and inward imperfections not of a moral nature.

The Christian is not perfect so as to be wholly free of temptation. Even the Son of God was tempted right up to the end of His life on earth.

Wesley wrote: “... everyone that is perfect is holy, and everyone that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth.”ⁱ

What then is Christian perfection? Christian perfection is simply the fact that the Christian is freed from the necessity to sin. The new person in Christ is no longer bound to obey the fallen human disposition, which always wants to live apart from God. Because of Christ we are freed to obey the perfect will of our heavenly Father. The Christian joins St. Paul in saying, *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me, Galatians 2:20.* [Here's Wesley again: "Christians are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness; that they are now in such a sense perfect as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers."ⁱⁱⁱ]

Stages and Degrees

Admittedly there are observable stages in the Christian life – from newborns in Christ to those who are going on to sainthood. Were it not so we would not speak of the time when we (as St. Paul says) *... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ, Eph. 4:13.* Like early Eastern Christian traditions Wesley understood "teleos" - the Greek word used in the N.T. for "perfect" (Τελειος Τελειωω Τελειοτης] - as the never-ending aspiration for all of love's perfecting fullness. [The word means "more perfect" (Heb. 9:11); "a bond which unites everything in complete harmony" (Col. 3:14); "become completely one" (John 17:23); "reach one's goal or finish one's work" (Luke 13:32).] It means to keep one's eyes fixed on the farthest horizon of the new life, being formed in one by Christ, and continuing to reach for it.

The Scriptures urge us to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord. Each of us has areas of living that need perfecting, that need God to fill. If you take seriously that *... It is God's will that you should be sanctified, 1 Thess. 4:3,* then you will see a change in how you look at yourself, change the way you talk about yourself, how you talk about others, how you see the world, and how you will serve the Lord.

For example: The world values popularity while God values character ... the kind of character He is growing in you. Going on to perfection means seeing people through God's eyes. So, how should I treat those who think differently from me - politically, socially, and morally? The same way Jesus treated us when we disagreed with him. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, Rom. 5:8.*

The world promotes the accumulation of money whereas God honors generosity. God is generous and that must be our aim as well. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life, John 3:16.* Going on to perfection means seeking ways to give as God gives. We talk about what we own. God looks at what we give away. The Christians does not count one penny given to God's purposes as a loss but as another opportunity to glorify the Giver of all things.

At the end of the day God destroys human pride. There can be no such thing as “proud holiness.” The upward call in Jesus Christ must draw in every affection of our bodies and souls, and we are each so diverse and complicated that there is always room for more perfection in our lives.

Saintly Potential

“He’s no saint!” Ever hear that? Ever say that about someone? Has that been said about you? Every Christian who steps through the threshold of salvation is on the way to sainthood. When you recognize your inability to serve God except by His grace and yet strive with all that is within you to serve the One who is making you holy... then you are being sanctified. It’s about fixing your eyes on the hope of your calling in Christ Jesus and making all things in your life minister to that hope. Saints never thought of themselves as saints, but as simply servants of God.

When that mind is in us that was in Christ; when we seek not to fulfil our own will, but the will of Him who sent us; when whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do all to the glory of God; then the Red Sea parts, the walls come tumbling down, the enemy is routed, and the church rolls on for the glory of God.

Give thanks that God is leading you on toward the saintly life. Let us show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that we will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises of our Heavenly Father.

Let us do but one thing:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, let us press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

ⁱJohn Wesley, “Christian Perfection” (1741), *John Wesley’s Sermons, An Anthology*, Outler & Heitzenrater, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 73.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 84.