

Joel 2:12-13

Oct. 24, 2021

Romans 12:1-3, 9-13

The Wesleyan Way IV Grace and Discipline

There are two grand doctrines of the Christian faith that unfortunately many who call themselves Christian, even those who have attended church and been official members of a congregation for many years, do not know nor understand: those that relate to the eternal Son of God, and to the Spirit of God. If Christians do not understand these two, they will be unable to adequately live as a Christian or share their faith with non-believers.

These two doctrines are: Son of God has given himself to pay the price for the sins of the world and the Spirit of God renews men and women in that image of God in which they were originally created.¹ The guiding verses for the renewed life are these:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose, Phil. 2:12-13.

Many read these verses and emphasize the phrase “work out your own salvation.” It’s taken as an invitation to once again be in charge and rely on one’s own spirit to please God with our efforts. Nothing could be further from the truth. A more accurate reading of these verses would be: “It is God that of his good pleasure works in you both to will and to do.”² The Holy Spirit works in us to shape our will to do His will ... just as we pray, “thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.”

God has joined together His work with ours to foster our sanctification and salvation. Since God is working in us we can have the will and power to love God and love as He loves. We can know the truth of Jesus: *Without me you can do nothing*, while saying with the Apostle Paul: *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. Beware of mock humility that says “Oh, I can do nothing of value for God,” which is an excuse for willful disobedience. If we cease working God will cease working in us.

“In insisting on both justification and real spiritual change, Wesley was bringing together two great concerns of the Christian heritage that have often drifted apart. The Reformation traditions stressed justification; the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions stressed transformation. Wesley was sure that we needed both if we were to do justice to all that God could do for us here and now.”³

Holiness of Heart and Life

For fear of the legalism and judgementalism that has often accompanied it, most Methodists have neglected talk of holiness. Maybe we’ve not understood the Wesleyan way of holiness. Though adamantly insistent on justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and that good works have no power to save us from sin, Wesley was also sure that doing good works has a place in our salvation.

In his sermon “Circumcision of the Heart” (1733), Wesley stated that Christian perfection means perfect love of God and neighbor which grows from a profound faith in

Christ. A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God, Romans 2:28-29.

It is the transformed heart, not the actions or works, that brings a person into God's will, so that pure and holy living results.

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity, Joel 2:13.

Wesleyanism believes that doing good and avoiding bad is not what makes one holy. Rather, it is a disposition of mind and spirit that arises from a heart transformed by Jesus. Doing good works does not make one good. But a good person does good things. Holiness is always the fruit, never the cause of our salvation. You don't have to be holy before God justifies you. Justification – pardon from sin – precedes holiness. Holiness is the evidence of sanctification taking place within us.

At the "Christmas Conference" of 1784, the Methodist Church was formally established in the U.S. This question was asked of all in attendance: "what can we rightly expect to be the task of Methodists in America?" The strong and unified response was: "To reform a continent and spread scriptural holiness across the land." That answer speaks to both personal and social holiness; what Wesley called "inward" and "outward" holiness.

Personal Holiness

Illustration: a little boy vying for attention of his preacher father who was working on a sermon. Dad gave the boy something to do to keep him busy: a full-page magazine photo of the earth. Dad tore it into pieces, threw the pieces up in the air and told the boy to "put the world back together." Dad thought this would keep his boy occupied for a long time. Within minutes the boy had the puzzle taped together and proudly showed it to his dad. Dad asked how he had done it so quickly. The boy turned the paper over to reveal a photo of a man's face. He said, 'When you get the man right, the world turns out right.'

Reforming a continent begins with each life ... most especially it must begin with each one of us. What God is doing in our sanctification is putting the whole human race back into the relationship with Himself that it was designed for.⁴

Paul writes in his letter to the Roman Christians: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, Rom. 8:1. When we give ourselves to Jesus, He justifies us, cleanses us of sin, gives us a new birth, then makes us fit – that is, sanctifies us – for kingdom living. Holiness is part of our salvation package.

Personal holiness is an everyday proposition. It's about obeying God by loving one another as God first loved us. It is obeying God when it's inconvenient, against our own personal interest and desires, and helping those in need, even when we don't 'feel' like it. If we say "I'll obey God when I feel good," we won't get around to it. We must say, "When I obey God, I'll feel good." Take care though, do not focus solely on what He has done for you, for our goal is God Himself, not our joy or peace, or blessing, but God Himself in and through our living.

Social Holiness

There is no doubt that the Wesleyan Revival brought tremendous social reform to England and thence to the English-speaking world. The transformed person will bring his/her love of God and neighbor into the midst of the world's many ills. In our morally decadent society, we see the trivialization of marriage, pornography, abortion, poverty, addictions, racism, lack of resources for the poor and needy, violence and wars, unequal application of the law, and many others. Where do we begin? Our primary task is to love and to be faithful to Christ our Lord. Our first call is not to social or political tasks, but to our life together as faithful disciples of Jesus. That is what will make an impact socially and politically. Though we may be wise to the workings of social movements, politics, and government programs, we must not place our trust in these. We demonstrate by who we are, what we say, and how we live that there is a kingdom reality that transcends all earthly systems and programs.⁵ Christian charity is more radical than government programs – offering personal compassion, giving dignity to the poor and powerless, and hope that is not dependent on public policy but upon the promise that nothing can separate us from the great love of God we have in Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not hang out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and all manner of sinners to show how inclusive He was. He hung out with them to bring them to repentance and the saving grace of God. Our social holiness means seeking the betterment of the lives of those most in need, while sharing the best remedy of all: Jesus Christ.

Grace and Discipline

How can we keep alive the sanctification synergy of Holy Spirit power and human intent, faith and works? The Methodists got their name because of the methods employed to encourage and enhance sanctification in the believer. I think we've let lapse the determination that once guided the Methodist way of growing mature Christians. Our *Book of Discipline* has become a book of church law, rather than a guide for sanctification.

The word discipline comes from disciple or discipleship. A disciple is one who has surrendered his/her life to Jesus and is willing to be disciplined through obedience to Him. A disciplined life is essential to spiritual formation. That's what grows the inward holiness that issues in outward holiness.

Discipleship is the work of the Holy Spirit, revealing to us and reforming us, to bring about in us a life transformed by Christ. This happens not only at church, but also, at home, at work, in all areas of our lives, as we put into practice what the Holy Spirit has revealed to us. A key component is the small group experience. As Wesley said, "The private weekly meetings for prayer, examination, and particular exhortation has been the greatest means of keeping and confirming every blessing that was received by the word preached and diffusing it to others."⁶ The Methodist has made a commitment to grow in Christ through a small group of disciples, holding one another accountable. An ember pulled from the fire soon grows cold.

The Wesleyan Christian believes that God's grace continues to be imparted to us through means that God has given us, as stated in Scripture. These means are both

acts of piety and acts of mercy. The acts of piety are: Prayer, Scripture, The Lord's Supper, Fasting, Christian Conferencing – the class or small group.**

Acts of mercy include all our efforts to help the less fortunate and how we treat one another. The works of mercy that bring hope and help to those in need are ways that reveal God's action in our lives and in those we may assist. If we believe in Jesus, it is not what we gain, but what He pours through us that makes a difference in this world and in our lives.

The works of piety and mercy are never an end in themselves. In his sermon, "The Means of Grace," Wesley wrote: "it behooves us, first, always to retain a lively sense that God is above all means... Secondly, before you use any means let it be deeply impressed on your soul: There is no power in this... separate from God, it is a dry leaf, a shadow... Thirdly, in using all means, seek God alone... use all means as means; as ordained, not for their own sake but in order to the renewal of your soul in righteousness and true holiness..."⁷

We have our part to play each and every day – to use these means of grace to bring our souls into the light of Christ.

What Difference Does It Make?

Lives aimed toward holiness bring goodness, compassion, love, patience, and truth into the world. Such a life is like a pebble tossed into a placid pond. Its splash is small, but its ripples extend far beyond, moving whatever is before them.

A community of believers who are going on toward holiness has a powerful impact on the world, from local to global. "We are not here to develop a spiritual life of our own, or to enjoy spiritual retirement; we are here so to realize Jesus Christ that the Body of Christ may be built up."⁸

Without a firm conviction that God is calling us forward to His perfection we would sit comfortably on our justification, confident that Christ has forgiven all our sins, as we simply await our entrance into heaven. In other words, we would likely just go on about our lives and perhaps not even noticing how we're slowly slipping into the world's fallen ways of living.

Without the discipline of attending to the means of grace, we would grow cold in our faith, stunted in our growth toward maturity in Christ. We would "backslide" and be found no different than those who have not trust in Christ.

The path of sanctification always begins with pardon of sin offered by God, yet continues as *faith working through love*, Galatians 8:6. Wesleyan thought unifies doctrine and practice. "He [Wesley] held together faith and works, doctrine and experience, the individual and the social, the concerns of time and eternity."⁹

With our souls ever open to God's transforming grace let that be our way too.

'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning,' Joel 2:12.

**Prayer – all who desire the grace of God must pray, as our Lord stated: *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,* Matt. 7:7.

Scripture – early Methodists were derisively called “Bible-moths.” We must read and study the Bible for it is our primary resource for living. Scripture is ... able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, 2 Tim. 3:15.

The Lord’s Supper – For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes, I Cor. 11:26. Holy Communion confirms our faith but can also be a means of bringing one to faith in Christ.

Fasting – perhaps this means of grace is the least employed in our day, yet is found throughout Scripture. Fasting and prayer go together as a means of humbling ourselves and pouring out our souls before God and enlarging our prayers for others.

Christian Conferencing – This is about Christian fellowship. It’s not just a potluck meal. It’s the small group prayer, study, and examination along with the large group worship. Great preaching that awakens people to God but does not train them up in the ways of the Lord, is simply begetting children for Satan’s hand.

¹ John Wesley sermon, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” 1785.

² Ibid, I.1.

³ William Abraham, *Wesley For Armchair Theologians*, 63.

⁴ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, July 12.

⁵ Maxie Dunnam, *Going On To Salvation*, 107.

⁶ Jackson, *Works (of John Wesley)*; 11:433; as quoted in Dunnam, 131.

⁷ John Wesley sermon, “The Means of Grace,” V.4, 1746.

⁸ Chambers, July 12.

⁹ Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 143; as quoted in Dunnam, 98.