

**The Wesleyan Way II**  
**Justification, Pardon, Assurance**

Last week I began this series of messages on what Methodists believe. We are solidly within the mainstream of Christianity but with some distinct understandings - the Wesleyan way of understanding life and the Christian faith. Millions of people have come to faith in Christ and closer to the holiness of God through the Wesleyan way. This faith is shared by all Methodist denominations and Wesleyan churches, the Church of the Nazarene, Assemblies of God, Salvation Army, Calvary Chapel, Vineyard Churches, Pentecostal churches, and many Baptist churches.

Wesleyan theology, of course, derives its name from the preaching and teaching of John Wesley. Though a Christian, brought up in a Christian home, he could not find rest for his soul. He believed that Christ died for his sins and that he should do his best to emulate the Savior, the great example. At Oxford Univ. Wesley belonged to the "Holy Club" that focused on doing good deeds and attending to worship and sacrament. But the Holy Club was not a happy club. He did not find peace with God.

Last week I spoke of sin, which is universal, total, and personal. All our efforts to do good deeds cannot atone for our sinful nature. **Our nature of sin is not immorality and wrong-doing but the claim to be one's own god.** Humans are hopelessly entrapped in sin and are blinded to how sin has infected their very souls. Yet, God takes the initiative. His "prevenient grace," through the Holy Spirit, who reveals to us our true self, our true situation, and true need, brings us to repentance. When we realize how bad our sin really is and our need for God's help, we have reached the point of repentance; we've landed on the 'front porch' of God's house.

Now, because of His divine love, God opens the door that we may enter in. The threshold we cross, is pardon, forgiveness of sin. We call this justification. In that moment we are ready to receive salvation.

For John Wesley this moment came after many years of being religious and trying hard to be a good Christian. (Could that apply today?) When he realized the power of God's pardon of his sin, not a generalized pardon of humanity's sin, but his own, personal sin, then he began to experience the joy of salvation, experiencing each new day as a gift from God. Then the whole world heard about it!

**Justification And Pardon**

**Foundation Of Justification**

In the image of God humans were made, male and female. By the free, unmerited love of God the man and woman were holy and happy; knew, loved, and enjoyed God as long as they obeyed God. But they did disobey, sin entered in, and in that day they died. **With soul separated from God, the soul and body were corrupted by sin.**

**What Is Justification?**

Justification means that although we're still sinners, **God does not condemn us to the fate we deserve.** "The plain scriptural notion of justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins."<sup>1</sup> St. Paul quotes Psalm 32 ***Blessed are those whose transgressions***

***are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against him, Rom. 4:7-8.*** God does not inflict on the sinner what he deserves to suffer, because Christ Jesus suffered for him. All his past sins, in thought, word, and deed, are covered by the blood of Jesus. God is not deceived about our sinful character, but forgives us nonetheless as we place our trust in Christ's offering on our behalf.

### **Who Are Justified?**

Scripture makes plain that **the "ungodly" are justified by God's forgiveness**; the ungodly of every kind and degree, of every race and nation, male and female. It is only sinners who have need of pardon and, as explained last week, all people sin.

***You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly ... But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8.*** **One does not need to be "good enough" to be justified by God.** That is absurd, for who can ever be good enough? It is not the holy but the unholy who are forgiven. Those who are lost in their own sin condemned, by their own conscience because of their ungodly life, and cry to God, will find forgiveness.

### **On What Terms Are We Justified?**

In a word: faith. Faith in God's mercy to forgive our sin and Christ's atonement to pay for our sin, is a divine gift. **Justifying faith implies**, not only a divine evidence or conviction that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,' but **a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins**, that he loved me, and gave himself for me.<sup>2</sup>

**Faith is the only condition for justification.** ***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast, Eph. 2:8-9.*** Those without faith remain strangers to God. Yet that sinner who knows himself to be hopeless and helpless to be released from sin, and casts himself on the mercy of God in Christ, will find pardon and be counted just in God's eyes.

Now, what about human freedom? If one is unable to save himself from the mires of sin, what happens to his freedom – which is part of what it means to be fully human? Methodist theologian Billy Abraham speaks to this. The first moves back to wholeness and spiritual health are entirely God's, through prevenient grace and the offer of salvation. If, at this point, one refuses God's offer of healing and salvation, then the responsibility lies with him. **God allows humans the ability to resist or not resist God's grace** – thus divine grace and free will.<sup>3</sup> Just as Jesus says: ***Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil, John 3:19.***

But if humans cannot choose not to sin, if they are incapable of helping their own salvation, how can we say they can choose not to receive God's grace? Here another Methodist theologian, Maxie Dunnam, offers this illustration from 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch pastor Jacob Arminius: "A rich man bestows, on a poor and famishing beggar, alms by which he may be able to maintain himself and his family. Does it cease to be a pure gift, because the beggar extends his hand to receive it? Can it be said with propriety, that 'the alms depended partly on the liberality of the Donor, and partly on the liberality

of the Receiver,' though the latter would not have possessed the alms unless he had received it by stretching out his hand?"<sup>4</sup>

Justification is not limited to a group of elect that God has chosen before time. It's offered to all. Yet **in freedom some will refuse God's offer so not all will be justified.** It's like this: In the Cross of Jesus God redeemed the whole human race from the possibility of damnation through the heredity of sin. Condemnation does not come from being born into sin, but from refusing the deliverance from sin offered through Jesus Christ.

### **Assurance of Forgiveness**

The Wesleyan way teaches that **it is the common privilege of believers to be given assurance of their salvation.** Romans 8:16 says: ***The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.*** On May 24, 1738 at a prayer meeting at Aldersgate Street, in London, (upon hearing read Luther's preface to Paul's Epistle to the Romans) Wesley's "heart was strangely warmed." He later wrote that, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for my salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." (Note the language of justification – "take away my sins" – and the language of regeneration – "saved me from the law of sin and death.")<sup>5</sup>

This experience brought Wesley to realize he was a "son" of God, no longer a stranger. He knew personally of God's love. He knew he was not saved by good works but for good works and that faith alone was the source of power to live for God.

### **New Birth**

Citing this passage of Scripture - *Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*" John 3:5-7 - Wesley says: "If any doctrine within the whole compass of Christianity may be properly termed fundamental, they are doubtless these two – the doctrine of justification, and that of the new birth..."<sup>6</sup>

Here Wesleyanism is similar to other evangelical Protestant churches – emphasizing a "born again" experience. The moment we are justified by the grace of God through the redemption we have in Jesus we are also "born of the Spirit." This is the **spiritual rebirth that begins the renewal of God's moral image that was twisted and perverted by sin.** This renewal is also called "regeneration" – that is, regenerating God's holiness in our lives. The new birth is the front room of God's house, where we begin to "grow up in him who is our head."

There is an analogy between this spiritual birth and natural birth.<sup>7</sup> A woman gives birth to a child in a very short time. Afterward the child grows gradually until reaching adulthood. Similarly, as one is born of God in a moment one also, by slow degrees, grows to the measure of the full stature of Christ. This is what we call "sanctification" which we will consider next week.

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

Understanding our true state of sin and then receiving God's grace to justify us, makes possible the great work of God: the restoration and renewal of our original goodness. Justification gets us out of despair and on the road of gospel grace and love.

Secondly, **no one can boast of how good they are.** Pride is banished when sinners know that only by faith in Christ's sacrifice are they pardoned of their sin. This should instill great humility in us all.

Thirdly, justification and being "born again" are necessary to begin the transformation of the human soul.

When it comes to assurance of our salvation, let me borrow again from Maxie Dunnam: Assurance of our salvation – the Spirit witnessing to our spirits that we are children of God – tells us that we are God's own now, not just in some distant future. **We need not be overly concerned about future security, for we are assured of our present relationship with Christ.** We don't have to take our spiritual temperature minute by minute because we can relax in our trust of the Lord.

We can always remember that the goodness of God once shown to us in Christ is the goodness of God toward us for all time. We know that we have repented of our sins and can continue to repent daily.

Assurance is ours when we become aware of a new character forming within us – as we see fruit of the Spirit becoming more prominent in us. We can be joyous in our service for God, but not driven in our doing good, because we know that our works do not save us.

Assurance overcomes our timidity about sharing our faith in Christ. We don't have to be street preachers or insistent witnesses. Knowing that tenderness, patience, and understanding are authentic witness to God's love, we can gently share our trust in Christ because we are assured of it. We can know that we have not been given a spirit of fear, but the spirit of adoption and we can cry "Abba, Father."<sup>8</sup>

To recap: **Justification is what God does for us.** Next week we'll consider **sanctification, what God works in us.**

***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***

---

<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, sermon *Justification by Faith*, 1746.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham, *Wesley For Armchair Theologians*, 54-56.

<sup>4</sup> Maxie Dunnam, *Going On To Salvation, A Study of Wesleyan Beliefs*, 145.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>6</sup> John Wesley, sermon *The New Birth*, 1760.

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, sermon *The New Birth*, IV.3, 1760.

<sup>8</sup> Dunnam, 73-74.