

Nobody's Perfect, Right?

Matthew 5:48

1) There is nothing that distinguishes Methodist teaching more than the term "Christian Perfection." I attended our Annual Conference this week in Muncie on the campus of Ball State University. I watched the new class of ministerial elders to be ordained being asked the same historic questions I was asked over 40 years ago that date back to John Wesley. Among them are these two:

1. Are you going on to perfection?
2. Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?

a. We may think these questions quaint or even misguided today, but they refer to the Methodist believe that there is a trajectory about the Christian life. Our lives in Christ should be taking us someplace. We should love Christ more today than we did 5 years ago, and we should love him more 5 years from now than we do today. This work in our lives conforming us more and more to the image of Jesus Christ is called "sanctifying grace."

b. John Wesley referred to the doctrine of Christian perfection as "*the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists.*" Wesley used other terms to speak of this work, such as perfect love, entire sanctification, and holiness. Whatever the term, Wesley's teaching emphasized a state of grace beyond justification or the new birth.

c. So sure were our spiritual forefathers who organized our denomination on this continent in 1784 in Baltimore in this teaching that at the founding conference they asked themselves the question: "What may we reasonably believe to be God's design in raising up Methodist preachers?" The answer written into the minutes was, "To reform the continent, and to spread scriptural holiness over these lands."

2) When Wesley used the term perfection to describe a state of grace possible for fallen humanity, it was more than most could accept. In fact, it was more than Wesley himself could allow. So he modified it by explaining that the perfection he preached is not absolute perfection, or angelic perfection, or sinless perfection; rather, it is "Christian perfection." Still, many remain uncomfortable with the word "perfection."

a. So why use it? Why not abandon it for some better, less antagonizing term? Wesley pointed out that the Church had no qualms about using the word in its liturgy. We pray,
"Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee . . ."

b. For Wesley, the word was simply Scriptural. He said "neither you nor I can in conscience object against it, unless we would send the Holy Ghost to school, and teach Him to speak who made the tongue."
Jesus told His disciples to

". . . be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
(Matthew 5:48)

3) Quite honestly, though we are the sons and daughters of Wesley today, most of us squirm and are uncomfortable with this term "perfection." Who wants to stand up and claim that standard for their lives today? Frankly, any person who did that would be met with disdain. After all, no one's perfect. Right?

a. It sounds impressively humble to disclaim perfection or holiness as a present reality. But, an unbiased reading of the Bible will reveal that God's commands and promises for holiness are not wistful words about the sweet by and by. The standard that God set for His people in both the Old and New Testament is

"be holy, for I am holy." (Leviticus 11:44; I Peter 1:16)

b. Christ died to accomplish our sanctification.

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy . . . to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." (Ephesians 5:25-27)

c. He prayed that it might be done.

"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. . . For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." (John 17:17,19)

d. The Apostle Paul likewise prayed that it might be so.

"May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."
(I Thessalonians 5:23)

e. And the Bible teaches that it may be received through faith. When the Lord Jesus commissioned Paul on the Road to Damascus to go to the Gentiles, He said to him:

"I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."
(Acts 26:17b-18)

f. God's standard is demanding, for sure. And, perhaps the way some Christians have even described it, it is beyond reality. But perhaps we should ask whether our feigning humility might not be our camouflage for second-rate commitment and third-rate spiritual disciplines.

4) Wesley concurred with the Reformers' understanding that there is no area or aspect of our humanity unaffected by sin. With the Reformers, Wesley believed that justification or forgiveness of sins was the ground of the Christian life. Where he went beyond the Reformers was that he was sure that God could do something for penitent sinners beyond forgiving them.

a. As Bill Bright and Campus Crusade acknowledged, the "Four Spiritual Laws" must have a sequel in "The Spirit-filled Life" if we are to be more than carnal Christians.

b. Many of God's people have discovered that His promise to
"forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"
(I John 1:9)
is more than idle words. Clean hands and pure hearts are still the biblical standard.

5) We are part of a church body today that historically has held to a high view of grace. By grace we mean God's loving action in human existence through the everpresent agency of the Holy Spirit.

a. Transformation is the theme of our teaching.

- Invenient grace, if God has been at work for no little time preparing us for the moment of our forgiveness of sins and the new birth.
- Then, God certainly would be at work long after the event to transform us into the image of His Son.

b. Wesley believed that any declaration of the Gospel, which places limits on the scope of God's deliverance in this life, impugns the character of God. He believed that there could be no limits on the grace of God and that all were called to the very highest standard of life. There is no one beyond the reach of God's grace, and therefore none who could excuse herself from the obligation to seek for the perfection that God offers as a free gift of his grace.

6) Of course, the difficulty is with the word perfection. Understood as the state of being without fault or defect (according to Webster), the term is one that can only be applied truthfully to God.

- Our problem is that we are functioning with a philosophical definition of perfection, that is, "Without flaw or defect," when in truth such a definition does not fit the Biblical usage.
- The idea of "completeness" more adequately interprets Scriptural use.

a. That is why Wesley could say that all he meant by Christian perfection is

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

Love of God and neighbor is the essence of Christian perfection. Wesley always knew that the full flowering of God's grace restored men and women to authentic humanity; it did not render them superhuman or angelic. It's about being the person God wants you to be.

b. Believers enjoy the extraordinary privilege of "delighting" in God. Fallen humankind may give credence to the notion that God exists, may have a vague awareness of God's power, may even cower before God in terror – or may be indifferent to all of this. In no case does unsanctified humankind "delight" in God.

c. As we experience the holiness of God, this compels us to experience a whole new world where we see and share His concerns.

- The holiness which God asks of us is not characterized by being seen at the all-night prayer vigil, but whether it makes a difference to the pressure points of life.
- You do not become holy by keeping yourself pure and clean from the world but by plunging into ministry on behalf of the world's hurting ones.

The communal forms of faith in the Wesleyan tradition not only promote personal growth; they also equip and mobilize us for mission and service to the world. For Wesley there is no religion but social religion, no holiness but social holiness. He said, you cannot be holy except as you are engaged in making the world a better place.

d. It would be a mistake to view the Wesleyan revival as an exercise in social activism. Even so, the depth and spontaneity of its message had a revolutionary impact on its surroundings. The abolition of slavery, prison reform, and the emergence of the labor movement in England are all directly related to the influence of the revival.

7) Wesley's method for the Methodist groups he formed was to thrust the newly converted Christians immediately into the quest for wholeness of heart – to assist them to believe that God could and would cleanse their hearts so they might perfectly love Him.

If by faith they came into the blessing of a pure heart, they were to understand that only by a moment-by-moment relationship with their Lord, living in complete dependence upon His grace, could they be sustained in such a holy oneness.

Who is to say that such a Biblical standard of grace is not really possible? The founder of Methodism certainly believed that it is. What were those questions again?

1. Are you going on to perfection?
2. Do you expect to be made perfect in this life?