

1 Sermon, July 3, 2011

Texts: Philippians 3:12-21, 2 Peter 3:14-18, Matthew 5:43-48

Title: "Christian Perfection??" (John Wesley's sermons, reinterpreted – Sermon 40)

1. Wesley's original is a logical proof of over 8,000 words.
 - 1a. List scriptural support
2. Why should we want to be perfect as opposed to strong, wise, entertained?
3. Joy and peace
4. A matter of the heart

1. Wesley's original is a logical proof of over 8,000 words.

Reading one of John Wesley's sermons can be like reading a legal document. It is a logical argument, meant to convince you; to change your thinking. Wesley's sermon on Christian Perfection is over 8,000 words. That's long; about four times what I'll preach to you today.

Wesley's sermons are crammed with supporting evidence, which is most generally from the scriptures.

So today I'm going to preach to you based on one of Wesley's sermons about a doctrine that is central to our Methodist heritage. It is the idea that Christians can be made perfect in love in this life. He defines perfection as being free from sin. You might say it is living a life in tune with God.

Christian perfection is also called holiness, or sanctification. It is living like Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to replace our tendency to sin with a tendency to love.

A Wesley Scholar, David Lowes Watson, says that a better translation of "perfect" in the New Testament might be "mature." It is a maturity born of living your faith day by day, and letting the Holy Spirit work on you.

1a. List scriptural support

John Wesley's central texts to show that it is possible to be made perfect in love in this life are mostly from the New Testament letters.

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We know that the persons we used to be were nailed to the cross with Jesus. This was done, so that our sinful bodies would no longer be the slaves of sin. We know that sin doesn't have power over dead people.

As surely as we died with Christ, we believe we will also live with him. We know that death no longer has any power over Christ. He died and was raised to life, never again to die. **10**When Christ died, he died for sin once and for all. But now he is alive, and he lives only for God. **11**In the same way, you must think of yourselves as dead to the power of sin. But Christ Jesus has given life to you, and you live for God. Romans 6:6-11, CEV.

That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God. Romans 6:13, 14, Message.

You used to be slaves of sin. But I thank God that with all your heart you obeyed the teaching you received from me. Now you are set free from sin and are slaves who please God." Romans 6:17, 18, CEV.

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV.

"Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God." 2 Corinthians 7:1, NRSV.

"Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you." Philippians 3:15, NRSV.

"... I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." Galatians 2:19, 20, NRSV.

"Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to *live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.*" 1 Peter 4:1, 2, NRSV.

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"We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them." 1 John 5:18, NRSV.

Wesley also quotes many other passages from other places in scripture, including what Jesus said to the woman caught in the act of adultery: "go and sin no more." [John 8:11]

1b. Not perfect so as to be free from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptation

You can see that when Wesley talked about Christian perfection, it had nothing to do with one's physical body. It had nothing to do with looks or health. It was a spiritual thing.

Christian maturity (= Christian perfection) does not mean that you never make mistakes, or that you are never tempted. Christian perfection doesn't mean that you know it all.

If you strive after Christian maturity, you are never finished with it. You can never say, "Well, I've reached perfection, so I can rest easy now." No, if you are "going on to perfection," it becomes a way of living, so that your heart and mind are becoming more and more in tune with the will of God.

2. Why should we want to be perfect as opposed to rich, famous, strong, wise, entertained?

You might ask, "Why would I want Christian maturity? What's so great about being perfect, or mature?"

This working all the time to be better, more Christ-like — is it worth it?

Let me ask you a question. Why are you in church today? Is it not to become more Christ-like? I doubt it's to be entertained. I doubt that it's just a social event.

There is a deep longing in you to be more *something*. You may not have the words to describe it, but there is a sense that, even if life is going well for you, it is not quite complete. There is something more that God can do in you and in your life.

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There are plenty of competing pressures: to be rich, to be strong, to be famous, to be entertained. These other pressures pull on us, and we sometimes call them temptation, because they relate to the sins of greed, pride or sloth.

Temptations are ever-present all around us. Time magazine reported that as much is spent on illegal drugs in this country as is spent on higher education. That means a lot of people are succumbing to temptation.

The longing after Christian maturity pulls in the opposite direction, toward love and justice. For a better world — It's not just about me.

3. A Matter of the Heart

I preached recently on the means of grace, which is what John Wesley taught about as ways to faith. They are the "how" of Christian maturity: prayer, reading the scripture, the Lord's Supper and more.

This sermon is not about the "how," but rather about the "why." Why do we want Christian maturity?

Well, it's really a matter of freedom. John Wesley emphasized freedom *from* sin — freedom *from* self-condemnation, freedom *from* our worst selves, freedom *from* a cycle of hatred and violence, freedom *from* being caught up in our own little world.

I think it's equally important to talk about freedom *for*. Christian maturity is about freedom *for* a deeper understanding of reality, freedom *for* a greater contentment, freedom *for* a better relationship with my neighbor, freedom *for* new challenges that help us grow, freedom *for* a deeper, more Christ-like love.

John Wesley, with all his logical thinking, may not have been as able to express it, but he knew that Christian maturity is a matter of the heart, as well as the head.

Christian maturity is about learning to forgive, and realizing that it sets our spirits free from bitterness about even betrayal. Christian maturity is about getting so used to responding with thankfulness that it becomes second nature. Christian maturity is about coming to see prayer as a tool not for what we want, but to discover what God wants.

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Christian maturity is about treating spiritual challenges as gifts, not burdens.

John Wesley's understanding of being saved from sin is that it is a very practical thing.

The Baptists generally believe that you are saved from sin in order to go to heaven.

Wesley says: No, Life is not just a veil of tears to be suffered through in order to get to heaven. You are saved from sin in this life, so that you no longer have to sin, but are freed to live abundantly. Christ saves us from sin so that we can be better in this world, and then heaven is kind of like an additional benefit.

We talk about Christian maturity with words like joy and peace. One of the central themes of the Bible is that we are made in God's image, but sin clouds that image. Christian perfection is about scraping off the tarnish so that God's image can shine through us. And God's image is love.

Christian maturity is Christ's image of love made perfect in us.

Let me close with a reading from 1 John 2:

"I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling." 1 John 2:8-10, NRSV.

If you love your brother or sister, you are in the light. You are already being perfected in love.

Amen.

This one thing let us do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, let us press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus;" [Phil. 3:13, 14] crying unto him day and night, till we also

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are "delivered from the bondage of corruption, into the glorious liberty of the sons of God!" [Rom. 8:21]

"pure from the blood of all men," when he hath "not shunned to declare unto them all the counsel of God." [Acts 20:26, 27]
Yea, they know in every circumstance of life what the Lord requireth of them, and how to keep a conscience void of offence both toward God and toward man. [Acts 24:16]

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that they might receive the adoption of sons;" [Gal. 4:4] – that they might receive that "grace which is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim. 1:10) Now, therefore, they "are no more servants, but sons." [see Gal. 4:7] So that, whatsoever was the case of those under the law, we may safely affirm with St. John, that, since the gospel was given, "he that is born of God sinneth not." [1 John 5:18]

, "Wherefore girding up the loins of your mind, – as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." [1 Pet. 1:13]

He, therefore, who liveth in true believers, hath "purified their hearts by faith;" [Acts 15:9] insomuch that every one that hath Christ in him the hope of glory, [Col. 1:27] "purifieth himself, even as he is pure" (1 John 3:3) He is purified from pride; for Christ was lowly of heart. [Matt. 11:29] He is pure from self-will or desire; for Christ desired only to do the will of his Father, and to finish his work. [John 4:34; 5:30] And he is pure from anger, in the common sense of the word; for Christ was meek and gentle, patient and long-suffering. I say, in the common sense of the word; for all anger is not evil.

Thus doth Jesus "save his people from their sins:" [Matt. 1:21]

Exactly agreeable to this are his words in the first chapter of this Epistle, (1 John 1:5, &c.) "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, – we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." And again, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9]

"walking in the light, as he is in the light." [1 John 1:7]

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"Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me;" [Ps. 51:10] – and most remarkably by Ezekiel, in those words: "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; – and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. – Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses. – Thus saith the Lord your God, In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities, – the Heathen shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places; – I the Lord have spoken it, and I will do it." (Ezek. 36:25, &c.)

"Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters." 1 John 3:7-10, NRSV.