

## **Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith**

### **#8 Sanctification...Going on to Perfection**

First John 2:3-6 and Romans 12:1-2 (NRSV)

By John Gill

Today marks the seventh step along John Wesley's "Path of Salvation" which we have been exploring in the course of this sermon series on "the basics of the Christian faith." We started at "Original Sin," then passed the milestones of "Prevenient Grace," "Repentance," "Justification," "New Birth," "and "Assurance." Today we are nearing the destination of our journey... the goal toward which we have been aiming all along... that of "Holiness."

This important teaching of the Church has been called by many different names, all of which mean about the same thing: "holiness of heart," "imputed righteousness," "sanctification," or "sanctifying grace." But the phrase that John Wesley liked to use was "Christian Perfection." Wesley taught that, by the grace of God, a Christian can reach "perfection" in this life. So this morning, we'll try to come to a clearer understanding of what we, in our denomination, mean when we speak of "Christian Perfection."

"Perfection." It is an illusive thing in life, isn't it? There is a story about a preacher who was saying to his people that "none of us is perfect," and not only that, none of us today even has the opportunity of knowing a perfect person. In fact, he went so far as to challenge the people, asking them if any of them had even HEARD of a perfect person, other than Jesus, of course. One fellow stood up and said that HE knew of such a person. The pastor pressed him for details: ...Did he really know him? Had he met him?

The man admitted that he didn't know the man PERSONALLY, but that he had certainly heard a great deal about him. In fact, this "most perfect" man he was speaking about was none other than his wife's first husband!

You know, it has been said that the closest to perfection that any person gets is when he is filling out a job application! Yes, perfection IS hard to come by, isn't it!

Yet, remarkably, John Wesley insists that "Christian Perfection" is not only POSSIBLE, but VITAL to the Christian experience! Wesley's interest in holiness began long before his Aldersgate experience on May 24, 1738... the day he felt the assurance of his salvation. Thirteen years before, back in 1725, while students at Oxford University, John and his brother Charles formed, what they called, "The Holy Club." They and their fellow students strove to live "holy lives," setting themselves apart for service to God. They devoted themselves to observing the strictest spiritual disciplines: organizing their lives around prayer, Bible study, and works of charity.

Yet, as we have heard earlier in this series, while they were doing everything RIGHT in living holy lives, Wesley knew that something was very WRONG. It wasn't until that Aldersgate prayer meeting when he finally felt the justifying grace of God, the new birth in the Spirit, and the assurance of his salvation, that Wesley discovered the SECRET to "holy living."

You see, Aldersgate taught him that his understanding of how holiness fit into the Christian life was all wrong. He discovered, from his personal experience, that it is impossible for our sanctification to come PRIOR to justification. We can't live as authentic disciples until we become one. True holiness can only come AFTER we have the assurance that we have been justified.

There is a story that Bishop Roy Short used to tell about one of his fellow United Methodist bishops, J. Lloyd Decell. As you are very aware, in our denomination congregations do not "call" their pastors. United Methodist pastors are appointed by bishops to serve congregations.

It seems that one day, Bishop Decell called one of his pastors into his office after learning that the minister had been very disappointed in the appointment Bishop Decell had assigned him. The Bishop said, "My brother, I want you to know that this appointment has been 'sanctified' by long-hours of thought and prayer." The preacher replied, "Bishop, that's the strangest Methodist theology I ever heard!" The Bishop asked, "What do you mean?" The man answered, "According to Methodist theology, a thing has to be JUSTIFIED before it can be SANCTIFIED!"

The man was right, but his argument had nothing to do with the way bishops make appointments to churches.

For Wesley, justification DOES come before sanctification, but that didn't imply that sanctification was somehow LESS important. Both experiences are of equal importance to our Christian faith. Wesley held BOTH justification and sanctification as essential. He wrote that Methodists, "maintain with equal zeal and diligence, the doctrine of free, full, present justification on one hand, and of entire sanctification, both of heart and life, on the other; being as tenacious of *inward* holiness as any Mystic, and of *outward*, as any Pharisee."

You see, Wesley insisted that justification, while absolutely essential, isn't enough to make you a mature Christian. Justification isn't the destination of the Christian journey... Sanctification or Holiness is. If we think we have "arrived" in the Christian life simply because we have been saved, we are missing the mark, and we are incomplete disciples.

Howard Hendricks wisely observed: "It is foolish to build a chicken coop on the foundation of a skyscraper." In other words, the Christian who fails to live a holy life after he is saved is failing to utilize the foundation for his life that Christ has given him.

Christ saved us, yes...but saved us for WHAT? Wesley answers: Christ saved us "for the holy life... for Christian Perfection!"

What about you? How do *you* feel about Wesley's insistence on Christian Perfection? Does it make you uncomfortable? If so, you have a lot of company!

In Wesley's day, not everyone agreed with Wesley's doctrine of Christian Perfection. Some even called it heresy! They said that it bordered on blasphemy to suggest that anyone, saved or

not, could EVER achieve perfection in this life. And maybe some of YOU are feeling the same way.

Well, Wesley was undaunted by his critics. In fact, their accusations made him even more adamant. Wesley countered their criticism by declaring that, whether they liked it or not, the doctrine of Christian perfection is rooted in scripture. He argued that the doctrine wasn't HIS. He said, "It is the doctrine of St. Paul, the doctrine of St. James, of St. Peter, and St. John... I tell you, as plain as I can speak where and when I found this. I found it in the oracles of God in the Old and New Testaments."

A few moments ago, we read two passages that speak of Christian perfection, but there are many more. Listen to some other passages from the Word of God on the subject of Holiness or Sanctification:

From the first letter of St. Peter: *"Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as He who called you is holy, **be holy yourselves** in all your conduct; for it is written, **"You shall be holy, for I am holy."**" (1 Peter 1:14-16)*

From the pen of St. Paul in Ephesians: *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to **make her holy** by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of its kind – yes, so that **she may be holy and without blemish.**" (Ephesians 5:25-27)*

And as Jesus prayed for His disciples (in John 17): *"**Sanctify them** in the truth: Your Word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, **so that they also may be sanctified in truth.**" (John 17:17-19)*

And again from the lips of Jesus, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel: *"**Be perfect**, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)*

No. No one can argue against Christian Perfection, and base their argument on the Scriptures... Sanctification is entirely Biblical. Then why do so many people have trouble with the ideal of Christian perfection?

The confusion and controversy has been caused by a misunderstanding of what the Bible and John Wesley mean when they speak of "perfection." You see, those who oppose this doctrine understand the word "perfection" in terms of the Latin word "perfectus." "Perfectus" means *"a finished and complete state of attainment"* - or as the Webster's Dictionary defines it, *"the state of being without fault or defect."*

Clearly, if THAT is what Wesley meant when he taught Christian Perfection, he WOULD have been a heretic! But Wesley wasn't suggesting that a person can attain THAT kind of absolute perfection...without fault or defect. No one is "perfectus" ...absolutely perfect... no one except God himself.

Let Wesley make his own defense: *“Absolute and infallible perfection? I never contended for it. Sinless perfection? Neither do I contend for this, seeing the term is not scriptural. A perfection that perfectly fulfills the whole law, and so needs not the merit of Christ? I acknowledge none such – I do now, and always did, protest against it!”*

So, what DID Wesley mean by “perfection?” Not some angelic perfection ... not absolute perfection ... not sinless perfection. No. Wesley argued for “CHRISTIAN perfection.” (There IS a difference!)

You see, when Wesley spoke of perfection, he wasn’t thinking of the Latin word “perfectus.” He was trying to convey the meaning of the Greek word, “teleio.” “Teleio” means “to **make** perfect, to fulfill, to complete.”

Wesley wasn’t implying a perfect “state of being,” but rather, a **process** of becoming perfected and complete in Christ... a **growth** in Christian maturity... a **journey** toward a divinely appointed destination.

Perhaps we ought NOT to talk about simply BEING perfect, but instead, describe the Christian life as a process of BECOMING more and more perfect... IN LOVE. In other words, becoming more and more Christ-like in our attitudes, and our intentions, and our actions.

As we read in our Scripture reading from First John: *“Whoever obeys His Word, truly **in this person the love of God has reached perfection.**”* (1 John 2:5)

So, the irony is that, in effect, Wesley was describing an “imperfect perfection,” as self-contradictory as that sounds. He was able to hold this apparently incongruent position because he believed that there are two classifications of sin, - one that we have full control over, and one which we can never fully master.

He said that, first of all, there are our conscious sins... our sins against God and neighbor (what we usually think of as “sin”). Second, there is the sin of failing to be in absolute conformity with God’s will... the sin of not measuring up to God’s ideal. Wesley taught that a Christian CAN achieve a kind of perfection by overcoming the first kind of sins (in other words, we can be made perfect in love), and thereby avoid committing sin. But Wesley also insisted that NO ONE can achieve the absolute perfection of being totally in union with God’s will for our lives.

Wesley wrote: *“The perfect are never SO perfect as not to need forgiveness, and never perfect in such a way as to be independent from Christ.”* In fact, far from being IN-dependent from Christ, for Wesley, TRUE perfection (this “Christian Perfection” or sanctification) is a total DE-pendence on Christ. This perfection ...this overcoming of sin ...is only possible when we have completely surrendered our lives in full obedience to Jesus Christ and conformed our lives to Him. Christian Perfection is, or at least it OUGHT to be, the goal toward which we are all moving in our Christian journey.

Jerry Bridges, in his book, The Pursuit of Holiness, wrote these words of confession: *“One day as I was reading the second chapter of First John, I realized that my personal life’s-objective regarding holiness was less than that of John’s. He was saying, in effect, ‘Make it your aim NOT to sin.’ As I thought about this, I realized that, deep in my heart, MY real aim was ‘not to sin ...very much.’ Can you imagine a soldier going into battle with the aim of ‘not getting HIT very much?’”*

Wesley always insisted what the Scriptures themselves declare: that, as saved and redeemed Christians, we ought to SET AS OUR GOAL...NOT to sin. And he had the audacity to believe and preach that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is **possible** to actually purge ourselves of sinful-affections... to allow Christ to guide our lives and all we do... to be made “perfect...in love.”

So...now do you believe, along with John Wesley, in the doctrine of “Christian Perfection?” ...that, as Christians, we should set as our goal not to sin?” IS it too much to expect that those who call themselves Christians actually strive to be like Christ? Wesley didn’t think so. And neither do I.

In closing, I’d like to ask each of you two questions that every Methodist preacher, since the days of John Wesley, has had to answer before being ordained. Think carefully before you answer:

- 1) “Are you going on to perfection?” and
- 2) “Do YOU expect to be made perfect in love in this life?”

How would you answer? Yes? No?

If you say no, Wesley would ask you to answer this: “If you AREN’T going on to perfection.... ....where ARE you going?”

Romans 12:1-2 – “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”