

Series: Christianity 101: The Basics of the Christian Faith

#9: "Social Holiness...Faith in Action"

Matthew 25:31-40 and James 2:14-18 (NRSV)

By John Gill

This morning, we have finally come to the destination at the end of our "Path of Salvation" (these basics of the Christian faith) that we have been looking at over the past couple of months. By now, we have seen that there are a number of milestones each of us must pass along our journey of faith: our Original Sin that separates us from God; the Prevenient Grace of God that searches us out and finds us when we are lost; Repentance of our sins; being set-right, or Justified before God; the joy of being Born Again into a new life; the blessed Assurance of knowing that we have been saved; and the call to Sanctification and holy living, or what John Wesley (our spiritual father in Methodism) liked to call, "Christian Perfection."

Unfortunately, many people go only part-way along the "Path of Salvation" and get stuck at one point or the other along the way. And then they don't understand why they never really experience the fullness of the Christian life. But if **you** have come this far along **your** faith journey, then you are ready for the final step along the path: that of "putting your faith into action," or what Wesley called, "Social Holiness."

One of Wesley's favorite books of the Bible was the Letter of James. Wesley liked what James had to say about the relationship between faith and works in the Christian life. However, the Letter of James has not always been fully appreciated in the history of the church because, on the subject of faith and works, James **appears** to contradict Paul.

Paul writes in a number of places that we are "saved by faith alone," not by works. Yet, as we read a few moments ago, James seems to contradict Paul. Listen to how James asks the question in the Good News Translation: "*What good is it for one of you to say that you have faith if your actions do not prove it? Can that faith save you?*"

What's going on here? ARE we saved by faith alone? Or are we saved by faith AND works? Which is right? Wesley says that BOTH are right!

As you already know from our sermon series, Wesley believed strongly in the necessity of personal salvation...that salvation is based solely on faith alone. All throughout his ministry Wesley preached with great passion for the conviction of sin and the conversion of the heart. He strongly agreed with Paul that "salvation comes only by faith." We are NOT saved by our works.

But Wesley also agreed with James: Good works are essential for the Christian life. The distinction Wesley made was that, while good works cannot save us, those who HAVE been saved will naturally produce good works. (Do you hear the distinction?) Wesley taught that the Christian life was much more than a "private individual" religion that we could enjoy in isolation. He insisted that, when your faith is real, it will result in good works or acts of charity, which he called "Social Holiness."

But Wesley didn't just dream this up... Jesus himself said as much: "*A tree shall be known by its fruit.*" Or in another place, "*A good tree will bear good fruit.*"

You see, Wesley based his whole approach to the Christian faith upon the two commandments Jesus gave his followers: 1) *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength;”* and 2) *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

Both of these were essential for Wesley and he held them side-by-side, equal in importance: We are to love *God* AND love *neighbor*; we need both *faith* AND *good works*. The Christian life is both *personal* AND *social*.

John Wesley made this very clear: *“Christianity is essentially a social religion,”* he said, *“and to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”* Or, as he put it on another occasion, *“The Gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”* There is no such thing as a private Christianity.

What he was saying was that, if our faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is sincere, it will have implications NOT ONLY for our personal lives, but our impact on society, as well. It is not enough for us to have faith if we don't LIVE our faith in the world. Listen again to what James writes: *“What good is it...if you say you have faith but do not have works? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”*

John Wesley not only preached the need to live out your faith...he practice what he preached! Wesley once heard about a man in his community named “Tom,” who was destitute and desperate. Wesley wrote him a comforting letter of hope, which read in part: “Dear Tom: I pray that life will soon be easier for you and your family. Remember Ps. 37:3 which says, “Trust in the Lord...and verily you shall be fed.”

But Wesley wasn't content just to give good advice. He included with the letter a sizable financial gift out of his own pocket. Not long after that, Wesley received a gracious reply from the man: *“Dear Mr. Wesley: I have often been struck by the beauty of the scripture passage you quoted. But I understand even better now HOW IT IS that the Lord ‘feeds the hungry.’ Thank you for your much needed gift.”*

Or as the old adage puts it: “People may doubt what you SAY, but they believe what you DO.”

For Wesley, His words and his deeds were one and the same. Wesley always went the extra mile in putting his faith into action. And the Methodist movement that he began has always tried to live up to his legacy by expressing our faith by our deeds of love. To do anything less would be *hypocrisy*.

Yes, Wesley had a burden in his heart for both the spiritual and temporal needs of INDIVIDUALS. But he **also** was concerned about the spiritual and temporal needs of SOCIETY.

Eighteenth century England, in which Wesley lived, was a time of great turmoil. There was a huge gulf between the wealthy aristocracy of England and the masses of common folk. Hunger, poverty, and illiteracy were rampant. The moral fabric of the nation had begun to unravel, and drunkenness, debauchery, and crime were on the rise. It was a society in crisis, spinning out of control. Sound familiar? In many ways, 18th century England sounds a lot like 21st century America, doesn't it?)

In Wesley's day, smoldering frustration and anger by the poor about the hopelessness of their plight was threatening to engulf England in a bloody class-war similar to the revolution that took place in France only a few years earlier. Yes, England was a nation in trouble.

Then came John Wesley's holiness movement...a spiritual revival that swept across Great Britain and America, preaching the Gospel to the poor and, at the same time, ministering to the needs of the forgotten. As the Methodist Revival gradually permeated English society, something remarkable began to happen...the social tensions were relieved. The historian, W. E. H. Lecky, even went so far as to declare that it was "*Wesley (who) saved England from a bloodbath.*"

Wesley and his followers defused ONE revolution by bringing about a different KIND of revolution...a revolution that began, NOT in the *streets* but in the *heart*, and THEN spilled over into the world around them. Wesley knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must first change individual hearts, before it can change the world. The Wesleyan Revival succeeded in doing BOTH!

We've spent eight weeks now focusing on how the Wesleyan Revival changed the hearts of individuals. Now let's look at how Wesley and Methodism changed the world.

John Wesley was a man who had a special gift for *recognizing* and *naming* the social ills of his day. And he was ALSO gifted with the moral and spiritual authority needed to stand up and vigorously denounce them. I suppose you could describe Wesley as something of a prophet for his day. Like the prophets of old, he stood up and called British society to account for their many sins, including permitting large segments of society to wallow in poverty, resorting to warfare to resolve disagreements between nations, and the immorality of slavery, among other sins.

While Wesley was concerned about MANY social issues of his day, probably his greatest effort was on behalf of the poor. As I said, millions of people in England were trapped in poverty and despair (not unlike the plight of many Americans today). Wesley believed that central to the Gospel of Christ was that each person is a "child of God," and therefore a person of dignity and worth. Everyone, even the poorest, were precious in God's sight.

Therefore, he gave a great deal of his own personal income away to help the poor. When Wesley was receiving a salary of 30 pounds a year, he lived off 28 and gave 2 away. Then, the next year, he received 60 pounds, but still lived on 28 and gave away 32. The third year, he received 90, lived on 28, and gave 62. The fourth year, he received 120 pounds, and...you guessed it...lived on 28 and gave the rest to the poor. Wesley lived to be 88 years old, and EVERY YEAR, he never spent more than 28 pounds on himself. He gave everything else away.

And he taught his followers to do the same. He wrote that those who failed to live frugally and failed to give their surplus away..."*were not only **robbing God**, continually embezzling and wasting their Lord's goods, but also **robbing the poor**, the hungry, the naked; wronged the widow and the fatherless; and making themselves accountable for the want, affliction, and distress which they MAY, but do NOT, remove.*" Strong words!

But Wesley's concern for the poor went far beyond lip-service: He instructed that every Methodist society have an active ministry to the needy. I'm proud that we at Sebastian UMC have been faithful in following Wesley's admonition to care for the poor, but of course, we could do even

more. And Wesley took the lead. He established a “poor house” for widows, orphans, and the blind. He created a credit-union for the poor which had two purposes: 1) so the poor could pay their debts and not be thrown into debtor’s prison, and 2) so the poor could start “cottage industries” in their homes and earn enough to support their families.

Even at age 80, Wesley worked tirelessly for the poor. That year, he spent 5 consecutive days walking the streets of London in ankle-deep snow to raise \$1,000 for the poor. There was no other person in English history who so identified himself with the poor, and the poor loved him for it, and they came in droves to hear him preach the Gospel.

Related to the issue of poverty in England was the issue of illiteracy. In Wesley’s day, there was no such thing as public education. The lucky children with educated mothers (like Wesley) were home-schooled. Only the rich could afford to hire tutors for their children or send them off to private academies. The uneducated poor were left to fend for themselves.

In response, Wesley formed free schools for the poor children who were running wild on the streets or working in sweat shops. The Methodist societies also established Sunday Schools to give the children a Christian education. One historian of the period said that it was Wesley *who “gave the first impulse to our popular (that is - ‘public’) education.”* Thanks to the Methodist movement, for the first time in history, the poor of England had a chance to get an education.

In addition to the illiteracy of the poor, Wesley also had compassion for their illnesses. His concern was for the whole person, soul-and-body. In fact, Wesley himself was a student of the medical arts, even writing a medical book of home remedies.

Early in his ministry, he organized groups of volunteers in each Methodist Society who regularly visited the sick. He set up a free-clinic, and in his own personal schedule set aside Fridays for receiving the sick at his house in London. He arranged for a surgeon to minister to the poor, and established a free pharmacy that dispensed medicines to 500 people!

It’s no wonder that, throughout its history, the Methodist Church has been active in establishing countless schools, colleges, and universities; orphanages and retirement homes; hospitals, medical clinics, and mission projects around the world.

There is not enough time this morning to speak of EVERY social evil Wesley fought against, but needless to say, Wesley gave himself whole-heartedly to living out his faith. Yes, Wesley had a passion to “save souls.” But he ALSO had a passion to “reform society” ... in his words, *“to spread Scriptural holiness across the land.”* And he certainly practiced what he preached!

Do you remember the Smothers Brothers? Years ago, the Smothers Brothers did a comedy routine on TV that went something like this: Dick asked, *“What’s wrong, Tommy? You seem a bit despondent.”* Tom replied, *“I am! I’m worried about the state of our American society!”* Dick asked, *“Well, what bothers you about it? Are you worried about the extent of poverty and hunger in the land?”* *“Oh no, that doesn’t really bother me.”* *“I see. Well are you concerned about the growing threat of nuclear war?”* *“No, that’s not a worry of mine.”* *“Are you upset about the use and abuse of drugs by the youth of America?”* *“No, that doesn’t bother me very much.”* Looking rather puzzled, Dick asked, *“Well, Tom, if you’re not bothered by poverty and hunger, war, and drugs, what ARE you worried about?”* Tommy replied, *“I’m worried about APAHY!”*

John Wesley was FAR from apathetic about the problems of HIS day. But how about you and me? We are the spiritual descendants of that great saint of the church...Do we share Wesley's passion to "save souls" AND his passion to "reform society?" Or are we apathetic, content to sit back, nurturing our own personal spiritual lives, and washing our hands of our responsibility to care for the hungry and hurting all around us?

Wesley insists that, if our faith is REAL, we have no choice. We MUST put our faith into action.

At Sebastian UMC, we offer you many ways to live out your faith and put it into action. You can join our team of volunteers that provides needed food for folks through our Soul Café or Welcome Table ministries (by the way, Soul Café is continuing to function, even though this pandemic – you could volunteer with that ministry right now). You could volunteer to help with the Ecumenical Food Pantry at Roseland UMC. You could volunteer with the Thrift Shop (when it reopens) that provides low cost items for people who may be struggling to make ends meet. You can find ways to support the Florida United Methodist Children's Home that ministers to children in crisis throughout our State. You could become a volunteer at one of our area Elementary Schools to read to the children or help in other ways (I serve on the School Advisory Committee for Sebastian Elementary – and I know when school is back in session, they would welcome volunteers). You can volunteer at one of the hospitals that serve our community. You can become part of a team of folks who reach out to our homebound members reminding them that they are loved and not forgotten (we need folks right now to do this ministry). Or on your own, you can find other ways to minister to those in need – and demonstrate your faith in tangible ways – to make your faith "real." How will you live out your faith?

In Germany after WW II, some American soldiers were cleaning up a large cathedral that had been hit by a bomb. It was the task of one soldier to gather all the fragmented pieces of statues into a pile. He found a beautiful statue of Jesus that was completely intact...except the hands were missing. He searched all through the rubble, but could not find the missing hands. Finally, he placed the hand-less statue on the altar and put a sign in front of it. The sign read: *"Your hands are MY hands."*

My friends, this is where our long "Path of Salvation" ultimately leads us. WE are the Lord's **hands** in the world today, by which he feeds the hungry. WE are His **eyes** to see the oppressed. WE are His **mouth** to proclaim the Good News of salvation. WE are His **arms** to lift up the downtrodden. ...WE ARE CHRIST'S BODY IN THE WORLD!

We look around our nation and our world and see so much that is wrong: And so we pray, "Lord, won't you DO something to feed the starving and help the poor? Won't you take action to stop violence and hatred? Won't you do something to right the wrongs and bring about justice in our broken and hurting world?"

And He responds to us, *"Yes, I WILL do something... ...I will send YOU!"*