

Session eight: Going on to perfection

(Chapter 10)

Goals for Today

1. Understand Wesley's take on perfection
2. How not to make yourself crazy trying to be perfect...but still caring about your walk

Wesley's thoughts on entire sanctification or perfection are a bit complicated. In some ways it seems like he took two thoughts—the positive effect of a new birth in Romans 6 and the dilemma of ongoing sin talked about in Romans 7—and tried to make them into one thought. I think the answer came across somewhat theoretical, which has been confusing for many, and has not stayed prominent through the years in what one hears from Methodist pulpits. In some ways, however, this might be a classic case calling for conjunctive theology...two thoughts that seem to contradict but can both be embraced.

Romans 6:1-4

*What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! **How can we who died to sin go on living in it?** Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.*

Romans 7: 14-20

*For we know that the law is spiritual; but **I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.** I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

So, on the one hand we can't just go on living in sin, though we will nevertheless do that some.

Perhaps one of the best passages of scripture that contains a balance that we can pursue in our lives is found in I John. You'll recognize some of Wesley's thought in it.

I John 1 & 2 (NRSV)

The Word of Life

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

God Is Light

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked.

A New Commandment

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet 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. But whoever hates another believer[e] is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness.

Our task is not so much to worry about detailed theology (though being firmly grounded in the foundational truths of Christianity is important), but to walk in the light in fellowship with God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus.

Do not try to earn forgiveness anymore than you would try to earn a birthday present, but accept it gratefully.

And do not try to pump yourself up to do good deeds, but rather let yourself be empowered by the relationship you have with God and Jesus who love you, feeding off of the Word, fellowship with Christians, and the provision of good thoughts, motivations, and abilities in your life by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore pray, read the Word, be involved with **congregational, class, and small group meetings**, and join with others in doing good deeds to those in need...offering both practical and spiritual help.

And you will grow.