

July 17

The Root of the Problem – We all Sin

Genesis 3:1-13

This spring I asked you to choose amongst a variety of topics for a sermon series this summer. The votes are in and two options garnered the most votes. John Wesley's view of Grace was a slight favorite so we will be examining this topic first. Number two was the Ten Commandments for Today and I decided to preach about this as well a bit later.

Our official book of Discipline says this about Grace, "Although Wesley shared with many other Christians a belief in grace, justification, assurance and sanctification, he combined them in a powerful manner to create a distinctive emphasis for living the full Christian life. Grace pervades our understanding of Christian faith and life. By grace we mean the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy Spirit." We are a denomination built on a theological foundation of grace. And so, today we will talk about, "Sin!"

At first glance it seems a funny place to start a series on Wesley's doctrine of Grace. But whether or not you realize it, we need to begin with Sin! You don't have to be a practicing Christian to realize that something is wrong with the human race. We look at things and say, "What's going on?" Wesley asked the same thing. He understood that the original creation was good, the result of a loving God expressing that love through everything that was made. Think about the creation story. At the end of each day God looks at what has been created and calls it good. This means that creation initially was good. This must mean that the mess we are in today could only come about because of human sinfulness. Once we understand why we are in this mess we will be able to understand the need for grace and how grace works in our lives.

When we start talking about sin and the various types of Grace that Wesley lifted up as ways God is working in our lives, I know it can get confusing. So I am going to be sharing an image over the course of this series that will hopefully help you to understand with better clarity what Wesley was trying to communicate.

In my student pastorate that I had while I was in seminary I got acquainted with Victor who was in his 90's at time. He spent his entire life in northeast Colorado. As a young man he had earned money as a well digger. The wells in that area were usually between 30 and 90 feet deep and hand dug at the time. He shared with me how he and a friend would spend their days digging. As they got deeper they would have to put a ladder in the well to climb down and build a framework above from which to hang a bucket on a rope. They would take turns digging while the other hauled up the dirt. They only got paid if they hit water. Sometimes they would have a dry well. They would spend weeks digging for nothing!

I want you to hold that image of a well digger. Sin is like a person digging a well with no ladder. As they dig the dirt is removed. They labor mightily going deeper and deeper and since there is no ladder they will never get out. That is a good image of sin. As we sin we dig a hole deeper and deeper, causing us to be farther from God. We can attempt all we want to try and get out on our own, but we are powerless to do so. Without the ladder we are stuck. Sin is the shovel we use, we will find out next week grace is the ladder that we need and God provides.

Even though we start with sin, for Wesley this is not a discouraging place to begin our journey. Wesley firmly believed that God created us as righteous people. Sometimes we tend to believe that we are evil folk trying to be good. Not for Wesley. We are good people who have had problems. For him, sin has struck at the root of God's intention for the human race. Think about the image we have from the Garden of Eden story. We have Adam and Eve in close relationship with God. They would talk freely with God. Initially they lived righteous live, by this I mean they lived in covenant with God who asked one thing of them, don't eat the fruit of a certain tree. This means that initially God valued us and trusted us. We are still valued.

Then sin enters, that first shovel full of dirt was flung out of the hole and we have been digging deeper ever since. It is no wonder things are as messed up as they are today because more people are digging deeper instead of trying to turn and climb out of the mess. But here is the good news. God does not leave us to our failings. God loves us and so God must confront sin and its ravages. God's love for us we call grace. It is a love that will not let us go. The Bible is ultimately a story of God's love and grace for us,

even though we sin. Think about the famous words of John 3:16 “For God so loved the world!” Sin shares with us why we need Grace. We cannot restore the brokenness of our relationship with God without help. But never forget that we are loved and valued.

If you haven't put the pieces together completely you need to understand Wesley had a different understanding of the term original sin that many of his day or today. Many have heard the phrase, “In Adam's fall we sin all.” This is the idea that after that first bite of the apple we have all been born sinners in need of salvation. It is a view that says we are born corrupt. It is a very negative image of humanity.

Wesley had a different idea. For him sin is broken relationships and it is conscious and willful. Sin, for Wesley, is not something you are born with, it arises out of you. To get back to my image. You are not born thrown into a half dug well with no ladder. You are instead given your own shovel and you dig your own hole! For Wesley, the idea of original sin comes into play in that as the world sins it makes it easier for each succeeding generation to continue or increase their sinning. He felt sin causes a sickness that has made the world ill. The Bible does not say we are sinners and this means we commit acts of sin. It says we commit acts of sin because we are sinners. Wesley believed Adam was in a perfect state before the fall. In sin the image of God in us was radically damaged. Intimacy between God and man was gone. Spiritual sickness was the result. But Wesley believed that through Grace we could be saved, we could get back to that perfect relationship with God. We can, with God's help, reverse the sickness and heal a broken world. All of this is shared for us to see why we need a savior. We cannot save ourselves.

Another way Wesley tried to help us to grasp this concept was to first of all think of sin as a thing. Let's imagine it to be a tumor in our body. The way you get rid of a tumor is to have surgery and remove it. If sin were a thing, then there is the possibility that we might be able to get rid of it. Figure out its root source, devise the tools for extraction and excise the tumor and we are saved.

But sin is not a thing like a tumor. It is more like an infection. When our body is dealing with a major infection there is nothing to remove. You must confront the infection and through the use of medicines stop its spread. Sin is an infection of our humanity. The only option is transformation. Grace is the antidote. For Wesley sin

makes us dead towards God. Sin destroys our relationship with God as it destroyed Adam and Eve's relationship to God in the garden. Sin is self-captivity, we make ourselves a god. We believe we are in charge and know what is best. It makes us a slave to our desires and this is the worst kind of slavery.

A simple example of what I have been sharing is something anyone who is around young children sees. You are setting the table for dinner. Food is being placed on the table. A child comes in and eyes one of the dishes that it is his or her all-time favorite. They look at it with longing. You share that it is almost time to eat and they just need to wait a bit. They understand what they are to do. But the lure of that food is more than they can cope with. You turn your back; a finger goes into the bowl and quickly into the mouth. You turn back, see the divot in the food, the smear on the face and ask them, "Did you eat some of that when I said no?" Usually they will deny it and immediately your relationship with them changes. They don't want to help anymore with setting the table. They want to leave because they feel guilty about what they have done. Now they have the ability to heal that relationship. How that happens is Grace.

For now remember that sin means we are helpless to change on our own accord. We continue to dig that hole getting deeper and deeper, farther from God. Once we understand our sinfulness, we understand our need to be saved, our need for grace. The good news is that we are loved, we are valued, we are trusted and so there is a way out of the hole we are digging. More about this next week.