

## August 14

The Heart of it All - Perfecting Grace  
Matthew 22:37-39

Probably the most misunderstood part of Wesley's doctrine of grace is the last piece, perfecting grace. As a United Methodist pastor part of the vows I took at my ordination, and these are vows all UM clergy make, were: "Are you going on to perfection?" That one was pretty easy to say yes to because we all hope to be better tomorrow in our life of faith than we are today. But then we are asked, "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" We are supposed to say yes to that question! If we don't we will not be ordained. You need to understand that Wesley would ask these two questions to you as well. He would expect you to be striving to go on to perfection and that you earnestly believe that you will be made perfect in love in this life. How are you doing?

The problems begin with the word Wesley chose to use when talking about this last way we experience grace. We hear the word perfect and we exclaim, "No one can be perfect!" That is true if what is meant is absolute purity of action and word. But Wesley did not use this definition when he talked about perfection. He never uses the word alone. He always adds Christian to perfection or talks about being perfect in love. Wesley believed that we could grow in faith to the point where there was complete unity between our faith and our actions. He called this being in a perfect state of grace. It is as close as we can get to living in heaven here on earth

First we need to understand that this idea was more than theoretical. Wesley believed he knew people who had obtained complete Christian perfection but he never claimed that he himself had achieved it. What does he mean then?

First we would not consciously sin. If we go back to that image of digging a dry well that I have been using for this series, Christian perfection means that you have climbed out of that hole of sin and are back on the surface. Even more, you have filled in that hole. Now, as I have been saying, I don't think we dig one big hole and call it sin. Each sin creates its own hole and drives us away from God. Complete Christian perfection means that we have climbed out of all of those sin created holes, filled them

in and realize that there is nothing in how we act, what we say, how we relate to others that separates us from God. Isn't that an awesome idea?

Wesley believed that: "The lure of God becomes greater than the lure of temptation." He sees that we have the ability to return to a relationship with God that is similar to what Adam and Eve first had. Initially, their's was a relationship of trust, openness, and honesty. They loved God and knew God loved them. They wanted to please God by how they acted. It was...paradise. Think about what it would mean to have that kind of total loving and trusting relationship with God? This is the goal we have set before us and God's grace will help us to continue to grow in faith and love.

Wesley understood Christian perfection does have its limits. Sin is still a possibility, just as it was for Adam and Eve. Even more, Wesley talked about unintended sinning. Where Eve's eating the apple was a deliberate disobeying of God's command, what Wesley was talking about wasn't a conscious act. Since we do not possess absolute knowledge or infallible judgment we could end up sinning without meaning to.

An example of unintended sinning would be someone shares with you a prayer concern. They do not tell you it is confidential. The very nature of the prayer request doesn't make you feel that it might be too sensitive to share. You are with a group praying for other's concerns and you mention this need. Later the person who shared it tells you that they had heard you were sharing their concern. It hurt them that you could not be trusted. There was no ill intent on your part but you caused another pain by your actions. Christian Perfection meant, for Wesley, that we might inadvertently sin but never knowingly or deliberately. We would not, to use my now tired image, pick up a shovel and start to dig a new hole of sin.

Most, if not all of us, have not reached that level of faithfulness. We know God demands we forgive, but sometimes we deliberately hold grudges. We know God asks us to love all, but we realize that we hold back from loving some for a variety of reasons. We are still moving on to perfection. An easier way to say this is that a person can so grow in grace that they always talk the talk and walk the walk.

So how do you live so that you can expect to be made perfect in love in this life? Wesley believed that the central purpose for our lives, that which gives meaning, direction, and power to life, is to love God fully and to love others like we love ourselves. Grace helps us love this completely. Saving grace continually reminds us to love. We are left feeling uncomfortable when we do not live out that calling as fully as God would demand.

And the more we grow in grace the easier it is to live a grace-filled life. Wesley said that the lure of God becomes greater than the lure of temptation. We are given the power and desire to say no. It creates a unity between faith, life, and action. This moves us beyond good intentions and even some actions to one who is transformed.

Think of some of the grace-filled people you have known in your life. They may not have obtained what Wesley termed perfection but they consistently and purposefully live their faith through quiet actions of care and love.

Shirley had a tough life. Her husband had died in his 50's leaving her to raise their children. Shirley was always on the brink of financial disaster. The church had helped her out several times. When I got to know her it was just after her grandson was sentenced to prison for life without parole for a murder. She had every reason to be angry and bitter with life. Yet, she was a positive person, filled with love and joy. She was always trying to help out around the church. If there was a special need, I could count on Shirley putting \$1 to \$5 in my pocket as she went out of church. What touched me the most was this event. Shirley finally sold her house. She had moved to a small apartment in a low cost housing project sometime before. She had hung on to the house longer than she should so her daughter had a place to stay. Once her daughter got on her feet, she sold the house. It was in such poor condition that she did not get much out of it. After paying off her debts and putting a little aside Shirley came to me with a check for \$5,000. She wanted it to be set aside to help others in their time of need. She was so appreciative that the church had been there for her when she needed it most that she wanted to pay it forward. When I mentioned that she could really use this money Shirley said, "I have been poor all of my life. I'm used to it so I don't want or need much money now. What I have regretted is that I could never do something really

special for others. Now is my chance.” She was truly going on to perfection. She just passed away recently and I heard the church was filled with people, all who had been touched by her smile, her love and her care.

Wesley also wanted us to understand that you don't get to perfect love without a radical, we would say complete, dependence on Christ. We recognize that whatever we do is the result of Christ's power at work in us. We ultimately see that we are set apart for the service of God. We do things because of God's love for us and through us. We ask each day what would God have me do today. Each day becomes an adventure in living and loving God and others.

So we end our journey concerning grace. It begins with us becoming aware of the fact that God loves us, cares about us and supports us. Later we begin to respond to that love and move away from self towards God. Over time we continue to grow in our love of God and find ways to love others. We find it easier and easier to say no to sin. Some of the holes we dug in our relationship with God we climb out of and fill in. The more we are aware of God's love the more we embrace that love. Ultimately, if we work at it long enough and hard enough we are able to fully embrace this grace on a daily basis. If we don't make it in this life we know we will find it on the other side of that door called death, for God's power to save is real. We celebrate how, through grace, we are being transformed each and every day.