

“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 52 – “Christian Perfection and John Wesley” (Part 2), Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on September 13th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

Read Psalm 18, verses 20-26 – “The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, And have not wickedly departed from my God. For all His judgments were before me, And I did not put away His statutes from me. I was also blameless before Him, And I kept myself from my iniquity. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, According to the cleanness of my hands in His sight. With the merciful You will show Yourself merciful; With a blameless man You will show Yourself blameless; With the pure You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd.” “For You will save the humble people, but will bring down haughty looks. For You will light my lamp; the Lord my God will enlighten my darkness. For by You I can run against a troop, by my God I can leap over a wall. As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven; He is a shield to all who trust in Him. For who is God, except the Lord? And who is a rock, except our God? It is God who arms me with strength, and makes my way perfect.”

For I have kept the ways of the Lord,.... John Gill says: “Not those which the Lord himself walks in, his ways of providence, or of grace; though these are and should be taken notice of and observed by good men, as the word used will bear to be rendered; but the ways which he has prescribed and directed men to walk in, the ways of his commandments, in which they should go; these were, in some measure, kept by David, who often, in the hundred nineteenth psalm speaks of his keeping the testimonies and statutes, and commandments of the Lord; as they are by good men, with some degree of pleasure, they take delight to walk in them; and with some degree of constancy, they keep walking in them, without turning to the right hand or the left, though solicited to it; but yet not perfectly, for they have many a slip and fall in them; wherefore this cannot be a reason of their being rewarded according to their righteousness: in strict justice, the words better agree with Christ, who kept the law of God perfectly, did his will completely; he came from heaven to do it; it was his meat and drink to accomplish it; and he always did the things which pleased his father, wherefore he rewarded him.”

Notice that in verse 30 that it says that God’s way is perfect, and that He is a shield to all who trust in Him. In justification God shields us from His wrath and condemnation at every point in our obedience, or lack of it. It is He who arms us with strength to go about to do and keep His commandments to whatever degree that we can perfectly. And then it is He who “makes my way perfect”. My way being made perfect is to realize that I have the shield of my salvation to cover me. God, by His Holy Spirit, is teaching me to put sin to death; my hands to make war against it. His right hand, Christ at the right hand of the Father, making intercession for me, being my Advocate with the Father when I need one, supplying me with grace, upholds me, and His gentleness makes me great. (gives me the power to become more holy and righteous) He, by His grace, enlarges my path under me so that my foot does not slip. This is Christian perfection and we persevere in it.

The Reformed and Calvinistic doctrine of Christian Perfection is “keeping the ways of the Lord”: The believer perseveres in evangelical obedience based upon acceptance with God through the substitutionary finished work of Jesus Christ; that is, Christ’s righteousness being imputed to the believer; both for justification, and to cover him as he is pursuing righteousness and holiness in sanctification. Christ by His Spirit imparts grace to him which works in his heart to help him go on to a greater obedience and maturity in keeping the commandments of God.

John Wesley’s view is: The believer goes on to attain to Christian perfection by his own striving for personal holiness by the power of the Spirit of God. This goal, he believes, is set before the Christian in the Bible as an attainable goal that he can most definitely receive the grace for, and can possibly achieve. He believes that God has made great statements about

holiness in the Bible, given us great promises in relation to holiness, and has commanded the believer to go on to perfection in holiness. The Christian can attain to it by praying for it, working at it, and receiving the grace from God to attain to that complete sanctification in this life. He also can fall from it once it has been attained, but he does not necessarily have to.

What is wrong with John Wesley's view of Christian Perfection?

1st – Wesley's definition of perfection, according to the Scriptures, is questionable. (The following quotes were taken from John Wesley's sermon "On Perfection", Sermon # 81 in the 2nd Volume of his Sermons on Several Occasions, P. 167-177)

Last week we looked into Wesley's definition of it which was giving one's heart to Christ and then being able to love God with all of your heart. We asked the question: But has anyone been able to love the Lord with all of their heart perfectly? And we concluded that no one except Christ has; He has kept it perfectly. And we further concluded that no one will keep God's law perfectly even as a believer, especially the commandment to love the Lord your God with all of your heart. Mr. Wesley appears to be placing great emphasis on his own and others perceptions of their own experience in sanctification as being perfect as the Scriptures describe it. It is not God who is judging whether they are perfect; it is they themselves who perceive themselves to have reached this state. The following transcription of Wesley's sermon, "On Patience" will show this. He is speaking of Christians in the following passage; some who have not yet attained to perfection and some who have.

This was taken from John Wesley's sermon, "On Patience" -

"Every one that is born of God, though he be as yet only a "babe in Christ", has the love of God in his heart, the love of his neighbor, together with lowliness, meekness, and resignation. But all of these are then in a low degree, in proportion to the degree of his faith. The faith of a babe in Christ is weak, generally mingled with doubts or fears; with doubts, whether he has not deceived himself; or fears, that he shall not endure to the end. And if, in order to prevent these perplexing doubts, or to remove those tormenting fears, he catches hold of the opinion, that a true believer cannot make shipwreck of the faith, experience will sooner or later show, that it is merely the staff of a broken reed, which will be so far from sustaining him, that it will only enter into his hand and pierce it. But to return. In the same proportion as he grows in faith, he grows in holiness: he increases in love, lowliness, meekness, in every part of the image of God; till it pleases God, after he is thoroughly convinced of inbred sin, of the total corruption of his nature, to take it all away, to purify his heart and cleanse him from all unrighteousness ; to fulfil that promise which he made first to his ancient people, and in them to the Israel of God in all ages, "I will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul." It is not easy to conceive what a difference there is, between that which he experiences now, and that which he experienced before.

Till this universal change was wrought in his soul, all his holiness was mixed. He was humble, but not entirely; his humility mixed with pride : He was meek, but his meekness was frequently interrupted by anger, or some uneasy and turbulent passion. His love of God was frequently damped, by the love of some creature: the love of his neighbor, by evil surmising, or some thought, if not temper, contrary to love. His will was not wholly melted down into the will of God ; but although in general he could say, "I come not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me" yet now and then nature rebelled, and he could not clearly say, "Lord, not as I will, but as thou wilt." His whole soul is now consistent with itself: there is no jarring string. All his passions flow in a continual stream, with an even tenor to God. To him that is entered into this

rest, you may truly say, "Calm thou ever art within, All unruffled, all serene!" There is no mixture of any contrary affections: all is peace and harmony after. Being filled with love, there is no more interruption of it, than of the beating of his heart, and continual love bringing continual joy in the Lord, he rejoices evermore. He converses continually with the God whom he loves, unto whom in everything he gives thanks. And as he now loves God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength, so Jesus now reigns alone in his heart, the Lord of every motion there.

But it may be inquired. In what manner does God work this entire, this universal change in the soul of a believer? This strange work, which so many will not believe, though we declare it unto them? Does he work it gradually, by slow degrees? or instantaneously, in a moment? How many are the disputes upon this head, even among the children of God! And so there will be, after all that ever was, or ever can be said upon it. For many will still say, with the famous Jew, "Non persuadebis, etiamsi persuaseris"; that is, "Thou shalt not persuade me, though thou dost persuade me." And they will be the more resolute herein, because the Scriptures are silent upon the subject; because the point is not determined, at least, not in express terms, in any part of the Oracles of God. Every man, therefore, may abound in his own sense, provided he will not be angry with those who differ from his opinion, nor entertain hard thoughts concerning them. Permit me, likewise, to add one thing more; Be the change instantaneous or gradual, see that you never rest till it is wrought in your own soul, if you desire to dwell with God in glory. This premised, in order to throw what light I can upon this interesting question, I will simply relate what I have seen myself in the course of many years. Four or five and forty years ago, when I had no distinct views of what the Apostle meant, by exhorting us to "leave the principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on to perfection"; two or three persons in London, whom I knew to be truly sincere, desired to give me an account of their experience. It appeared exceedingly strange, being different from any that I had heard before: but exactly similar to the preceding account of entire sanctification.

The next year, two or three more persons at Bristol, and two or three in Kingswood, coming to me severally, gave me exactly the same account of their experience. A few years after, I desired all those in London, who made the same profession, to come to me all together at the Foundery, that I might be thoroughly satisfied. I desired that man of God, Thomas Walsh, to give us the meeting there. When we met, first one of us, and then the other, asked them the most searching questions we could devise. They answered every one without hesitation, and with the utmost simplicity, so that we were fully persuaded, they did not deceive themselves. In the years 1759, 1760, 1761, and 1762, their numbers multiplied exceedingly, not only in London and Bristol, but in various parts of Ireland as well as England. Not trusting to the testimony of others, I carefully examined most of these myself: and in London alone, I found six hundred and fifty-two members of our Society, who were exceeding clear in their experience, and of whose testimony I could see no reason to doubt. I believe no year has passed since that time, wherein God has not wrought the same work in many others, but sometimes in one part of England or Ireland, sometimes in another; as "the wind bloweth where it listeth": and every one of these, (after the most careful inquiry, I have not found one exception either in Great Britain or Ireland,) has declared that his deliverance from sin was instantaneous, that the change was wrought in a moment. Had half of these, or one third, or one in twenty, declared it was gradually wrought in them, I should have believed this, with regard to them, and thought that some were gradually sanctified and some instantaneously.

But as I have not found, in so long a space of time, a single person speaking thus: as all who believe they are sanctified, declare with one voice, that the change was wrought in a moment; I cannot but believe, that sanctification is commonly, if not always, an instantaneous work. But however that question be decided, whether sanctification, in the full sense of the word, be

wrought instantaneously or gradually, how may we attain to it? “What shall we do,” said the Jews to our Lord, “that we may work the works of God?” His answer will suit those that ask, What shall we do, that this work of God may be wrought in us? “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” On this one work all the others depend. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and all his wisdom, and power, and faithfulness, are engaged on thy side.

In this, as in all other instances, “by grace we are saved through faith.” Sanctification too, is “not of works, lest any man should boast.” It is the gift of God, and is to be received by plain, simple faith. Suppose you are now laboring to “abstain from all appearance of evil”, “zealous of good works”, and walking diligently and carefully in all the ordinances of God; there is then only one point remaining : the voice of God to your soul is, “Believe and be saved.” First, Believe that God has promised to save you from all sin, and to fill you with all holiness. Secondly, Believe that he is able thus “to save to the uttermost all those that come unto God through him.” Thirdly, Believe that he is willing, as well as able, to save you to the uttermost ; to purify you from all sin, and fill up all your heart with love. Believe, fourthly, that he is not only able, but willing to do it now! Not when you come to die; not at any distant time ; not to-morrow, but to-day. He will then enable you to believe, it is done according to his word. And then “patience shall have its perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.” Ye shall then be perfect.

The Apostle seems to mean by this expression, τελειοι. Ye shall be wholly delivered from every evil work, from every evil word, from every sinful thought: yea, from every evil desire, passion, temper; from all inbred corruption, from all remains of the carnal mind, from the body of sin : and ye shall be renewed in the spirit of your mind, in every right temper, ‘after the image of him that created you, in righteousness and true holiness’. Ye shall be entire, εχοκχεντοι(the same word which the Apostle uses to the Christians in Thessalonica.) This seems to refer, not so much to the kind, as to the degree of holiness : as if he had said, " Ye shall enjoy as high a degree of holiness, as is consistent with your present state of pilgrimage." And ye shall want nothing ; the Lord being your Shepherd, your Father, your Redeemer, your Sanctifier, your God, and your All, will feed you with the bread of heaven, and give you meat enough. He will lead you forth beside the waters of comfort, and keep you every moment : so that loving him with all your heart, (which is the sum of all perfection,) you will " rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks," till “an abundant entrance is ministered unto you, into his everlasting kingdom.”

2nd – Wesley confuses the issue of whether there is always indwelling remaining corruption in the believer throughout his whole life, by his view of the cleansing of the believer’s heart in sanctification.

Ephesians 4: 17-24 – “This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

On page 169 in the 2nd Volume of his Sermons Wesley says: “Paul writes to the Christians at Ephesus, of ‘Putting on the new man, which is created after God in righteousness and true holiness’; “And to the Colossians, of “the new man renewed after the image of him that created him.” “Plainly referring to the words in Genesis chapter 1, verse 27 – “So God created man in his own image.” “Now the moral image of God consists (as the apostle observes) in

righteousness and true holiness.” “By sin this is totally destroyed.” “And we never can recover it, till we are ‘created anew in Christ Jesus.” “And this is perfection.”

A response to this:

From this last statement Wesley seems to be saying that when we are “created anew in Christ Jesus” that we then have this perfection of which he is speaking. But our being created anew is being regenerated by the Spirit, and in that regeneration the seed of righteousness and true holiness is placed in the heart, and the work of the Holy Spirit is perfect, but our own, in response, sadly is not. In relation to our own actual perfection, according to God’s standard of expected obedience, we are taught in the Scriptures to realize that there are many areas of our heart obedience and our outward behavior which at many points fall short of what God expects. It appears from these statements as well as many others that he makes in this sermon, that he believes that what God has commanded, and what God expects of every believer, is something that the believer has the capacity to do perfectly; if they will only work toward it, they will certainly find it. This appears to be placing the believer back under the law as a covenant of works, rather than seeing it as the law which Christ has already fulfilled on our behalf perfectly. It is His image that we are being conformed to, and we perfectly dependent upon Him to make progress in holiness. We should and will work toward perfection and yet we will not attain it in this life because we still have the remnants of the Old Man still with us until death.

You can see here from these verses on Ephesians 4: 20-24, that as a part of true Christian sanctification that believers are to put off the Old Man and put on the New. But you will also notice in these verses that the Old Man is “growing corrupt”. He is not gone. And he is the source of all the remaining sin and corruption in the Christian’s heart. The dominion of the Old Man is taken away in regeneration, but his presence was not eradicated, but remains with us until death, when he will be eradicated. So putting off the Old and putting on the New is something which is done many times in living the Christian life.

But Wesley disagrees with this when he says: Again, “Little children, let no man deceive you. He that commits sin is of the devil.” “Whosoever believeth, is born of God. And whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin, for his seed remains in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” Once more, “We know, that whosoever is born of God sins not: but he that is begotten of God keeps himself, and that wicked one touches him not.” (v. 18.) He that is, by faith, born of God, sins not, 1st, by any habitual sin; for all habitual sin is sin reigning: but sin cannot reign in any that believeth. Nor 2nd, by any willful sin, for his will, while he abides in the faith, is utterly set against all sin, and abhors it as deadly poison. Nor 3rd, by any sinful desire; for he continually desires the holy and perfect will of God; and any tendency to an unholy desire, he, by the grace of God, stifles in the birth. Nor 4th, doth he sin by infirmities, whether in act, word, or thought: for his infirmities have no concurrence of his will; and without this they are not properly sins. Thus, “He that is born of God doth not commit sin.” And though he cannot say, he hath not sinned, yet, now “he sins not”. This then is the salvation which is through Faith, even in the present world: a salvation from sin, and the consequences of sin, both often expressed in the word Justification; which, taken in the largest sense, implies a deliverance from guilt and punishment, by the atonement of Christ actually applied to the soul of the sinner now believing on Him, and a deliverance from the whole body of sin, through Christ, formed in his heart. So that he who is thus justified, or saved by faith, is indeed born again. He is born again of the Spirit unto a new life, “which is hid with Christ in God”. “He is a new creature: old things are passed away: all things in him are become new.” And as a new-born babe he gladly receives the $\alpha\beta\omicron\chi\omicron\nu$, the “sincere milk of the word, and grows thereby”; going on in the might of the Lord his

God, from faith to faith, from grace to grace, until at length he comes unto “a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”. Taken from his *Christian Theology*, P. 278, 279

Alexander Maclaren says: “Then, again, one more point in this portraiture of ‘the old man,’ is that these deceiving desires corrupt. The language of our text conveys a delicate shade of meaning which is somewhat blurred in our version. Properly, it speaks of ‘the old man which is growing corrupt,’ rather than ‘which is corrupt,’ and expresses the steady advance of that inward process of decay and deterioration which is ever the fate of a life subordinated to these desires. And this growing evil, or rather inward eating corruption which disintegrates and destroys a soul, is contrasted in the subsequent verse with the ‘new man which is created in righteousness.’ There is in the one the working of life, in the other the working of death. The one is formed and fashioned by the loving hands and quickening breath of God; the other is gradually and surely rotting away by the eating leprosy of sin. For the former the end is eternal life; for the latter, the second death.” Taken from his sermon on Ephesians 4: 22, “*A Dark Picture and a Bright Hope*”.

What does it mean then, “to put on the New Man”? It means that we deliberately pursue righteousness and holiness, as it says in 1st Timothy 6: 11 – “But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and gentleness.” We take up a sincere obedience to all of God’s moral commandments found in the 10 commandments and summed up by the 2 greatest commandments: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. We realize that in many ways that we shall fall short of perfectly keeping these commandments, as Christ did, but we eagerly do pursue keeping them.

Listen to Thomas Brooks on this Sincere Obedience – “In the covenant of works, God required perfect obedience in our own persons; but in the covenant of grace God will be content if there be but uprightness in us, if there be but sincere desires to obey, if there be faithful endeavors to obey, if there be a hearty willingness to obey. Well, saith God, though I stood upon perfect obedience in the covenant of works, 2 Cor. viii.12 ; yet now I will be satisfied with the will for the deed; if there be but uprightness of heart; though that be attended with many weaknesses and infirmities, yet I will be satisfied and contented with that. God, under the covenant of grace, will for Christ’s sake accept of less than he requires in the covenant of works. He requires perfection of degrees, but he will accept of perfection of parts; he requires us to live without sin, but he will accept of our sincere endeavors to do it. Though a believer, in his own person, cannot perform all that God commands, yet Jesus Christ, as his surety and in his stead, hath fulfilled the law for him. So that Christ’s perfect righteousness is a complete cover for a believer’s imperfect righteousness. Hence the believer flies from the covenant of works to the covenant of grace; from his own unrighteousness to the righteousness of Christ. If we consider the law in a high and rigid notion, so no believer can fulfil it; but if we consider the law in a soft and mild notion, so every believer does fulfil it: Acts xiii. 22, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will” ; Ταῦτα τὰ θελήματα, “All my wills”, to note the universality and sincerity of his obedience. David had many slips and falls, he often transgressed the royal law ; but being sincere in the main bent and frame of his heart, and in the course of his life, God looked upon his sincere obedience as perfect obedience. A sincere Christian’s obedience is an entire obedience to all the commands of God, though not in respect of practice, which is impossible, but in disposition and affection. A sincere obedience is a universal obedience. It is universal in respect of the subject, the whole man; it is universal in respect of the object, the whole law ; and it is universal in respect of duration, the whole life ; he who obeys sincerely obeys universally. There is no man that serves God truly that doth not endeavor to serve God fully: sincerity turns upon the hinges of universality ; he who obeys sincerely endeavours to obey thoroughly, Num. xiv. 24. A sincere Christian does not only love the law, and like the law, and approve of the law, and delight in the law, and consent to the law, that it is holy, just, and good, but he obeys it in part, Horn. vii. 12, 16, 22 ; which, though it be but in part, yet he being sincere therein, pressing towards the mark, and desiring and endeavoring to arrive at what is perfect, Phil. iii. 13, 14, God ‘accepts of such a

soul, and is as well pleased with such a soul, as if he had perfectly fulfilled the law. Where the heart is sincerely resolved to obey, there it does obey. A heart to obey, is our obeying; a heart to do, is our doing; a heart to believe, is our believing; a heart to repent, is our repenting; a heart to wait, is our waiting; a heart to suffer, is our suffering; a heart to pray, is our praying; a heart to hear, is our hearing; a heart to give, feed, clothe, visit, is our giving, feeding, clothing, visiting; a heart to walk circumspectly, is our walking circumspectly; a heart to work righteousness, is our working righteousness; a heart to shew mercy, is our shewing mercy; a heart to sympathize with others, is our sympathizing with others. He that sincerely desires and resolves to keep the commandments of God, he does keep the commandments of God, and he that truly desires and resolves to walk in the statutes of God, he does walk in the statutes of God. In God's account and God's acceptation, every believer, every sincere Christian, is as wise, holy, humble, heavenly, spiritual, watchful, faithful, fruitful, useful, thankful, joyful, &c., as he desires to be, as he resolves to be, and as he endeavours to be; and this is the glory of the new covenant, and the happiness that we gain by dear Jesus." Taken from the 5th Volume of Thomas Brooks *Works*, P. 327-329