

**“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 52 – “Christian Perfection and John Wesley” (Part 3), Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.**

1<sup>st</sup> Kings 15: 9-14 – “In the twentieth year of Jeroboam king of Israel, Asa became king over Judah. And he reigned forty- one years in Jerusalem. His grandmother's name was Maachah the granddaughter of Abishalom. Asa did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did his father David. And he banished the perverted persons from the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. Also he removed Maachah his grandmother from being queen mother, because she had made an obscene image of Asherah. And Asa cut down her obscene image and burned it by the Brook Kidron. But the high places were not removed. Nevertheless Asa's heart was loyal (“perfect” in the King James) to the Lord all his days.” The word in the original Hebrew is Shaw-lame. It means complete, friendly, full, just, made ready, peaceable, perfect, wholly devoted. But Christian perfection is loyalty to God and His word based upon the grace of Christ.

**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.**

**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.

**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”.

**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

1<sup>st</sup> John 3: 4-9 – “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.

Looking at these verses we see that “whoever abides in Him does not sin”. Whoever sins has neither see Him nor known Him.” How does this statement square with what John has previously state in 1<sup>st</sup> John 2: 1 – “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.” “And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. When it says that whoever abides in Him does not sin, it means that whoever abides in faith in the finished work of Christ, which is a perfect work, and has been born again of the Spirit of God, will not consciously, knowingly, pursue or tolerate the habits of sin in their actions or the motions of sin in their heart. They will abide in the truth that yes, there is indwelling remaining corruption in the heart, but the new nature within them, the new principle of life and righteousness will always do battle with sin and come to repent of it and forsake it. The strength of Christ’s grace will subdue their iniquities. (Micah 7: 19)

**John Gill says on 1<sup>st</sup> John 3: 6** – “Not that he has no sin in him, or lives without sin, but he does not live in sin, nor give up himself to a vicious course of life; for this would be inconsistent with his dwelling in Christ, and enjoying communion with him: **whosoever sinneth**; which is not to be understood of a single action, but of a course of sinning: hath not seen him, neither known him; that is, he has never seen Christ with an eye of faith; he has never truly and spiritually seen the glory, beauty, fullness, and suitableness of Christ, his need, and the worth of

him; he has never seen him so as to enjoy him, and have communion with him; for what communion hath Christ with Belial, or light with darkness, or righteousness with unrighteousness? 2Co\_6:14, nor has he ever savingly known him, or been experimentally acquainted with him; for though he may profess to know him in words, he denies him in works.”

**In John Wesley’s Journal of January 25th, 1739, he says:** I baptized John Smith (late Anabaptist) and four other adults at Islington. Of the adults I have known baptized lately, one only was at that time born again, in the full sense of the word; that is, found a thorough, inward change, by the love of God filling her heart. Most of them were only born again in a lower sense; that is, received the remission of their sins. And some (as it has since too plainly appeared) neither in one sense nor the other.”

But the Bible only teaches a person being born again in one sense – The regeneration of the heart, being born from above by the Spirit; the Holy Spirit planting the seed of righteousness in the heart of the believer. And it is this good work of the Spirit which is the basis of our receiving grace to persevere in faith and holiness.