

Moving on to Perfections

TEXT: Matthew 5:43-48

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 26, 2024

John Wesley's sermon titled "Christian Perfection" begins with quoting a passage where Saint Paul admits his lack of perfection in Philippians 3:12, and then Wesley goes on to say this in his first paragraph:

"There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this. The word perfect is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them. And whosoever preaches perfection (as the phrase is,) that is, asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican."

Wesley is on the defensive in this sermon because Wesley did preach that perfection was attainable in this life. He didn't only preach it, he wrote a whole book on it, published in 1777, reviewing over 50 years of his teaching on the subject. And he's absolutely right that it's not a concept that lands easily with those who hear it—either then or now.

Wesley grew and evolved on many issues across his long life; but not this one. And it persists to this day in the vows the United Methodist clergy have to take at ordination. "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?" The answer that allows you to be ordained is, "Yes." So, it's worth looking at what Wesley meant, what the Bible says, and in what ways it is or isn't relevant to us.

In Wesley's defense, the Bible does urge people to perfection in a number of places. Wesley's best-known phrase, "Moving on to perfection" comes from Hebrews 6, verse 1, but there's also Jesus' direct command to become perfect in Matthew 5 that Kim read earlier. That command is part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount—so it was a command he gave to the crowds of thousands who came to hear him, not just to his disciples.

With those verses, among many others, sitting in the Bible and representing the teaching of at least Jesus, Paul, and the author of the letter to the Hebrews, Wesley didn't believe he could fulfill his duty as a preacher and teacher of the Gospel without taking on the idea of perfection and helping people to understand what was being asked of us.

But Wesley's insistence on the possibility that Christians could become perfect in this life, had some unintended consequences. As people began to absorb the idea, some started to declare that they had, in fact, arrived. Done! Perfected! Don't bother me any more—unless you are here to serve me so that in doing so you might one day be as perfect as I am! As you might imagine, such claims didn't lead to peace and harmony with others in the Methodist movement.

That outcome was not on Wesley's Bingo card, he countered it by saying that, while it was possible to attain perfection in this life, if you believed yourself to have attained it, then you were lacking in humility and therefore had not become perfect after all. If you want to know why so many of us Methodist clergy are neurotic, look no further!

So, why are United Methodists—to this day—still insisting on perfection? How can it possibly be justified in the face of millennia of horrific Christian behavior, and how can it help anything apart from our therapist's checkbooks here in the 21st century? Let's look under the hood.

In the sermon I quoted at the outset, Wesley does give some space for ways that Christians can't be perfect.

For example, he says we are not, and will never be on this earth, perfect in knowledge. That's plain in 1 Corinthians 13—we know only in part in this life, Paul says, comparing our knowledge in earthly life as looking through a dirty piece of glass. Since the Bible itself insists that we can't be perfect in knowledge in this life, we can't be free from ignorance, which means we also can't be free from mistakes.

When we don't have all the information, we mess up. Worse, if we're too afraid to act because we can't know the unknowable, that's also making a mistake because taking action is the only way any virtue is made manifest in the world. Wanting to run into a burning building to save someone gets us no brownie points for courage if we don't actually do it. In similar ways, Wesley notes that Christians are also not free from infirmities or temptation. Perfection for Wesley is about our behavior in the things we can control, not about the things we can't.

And in answer to those claiming that they have been perfected already and can therefore kick back by the pool with their beverage of choice, Wesley notes:

“Christian perfection, therefore, does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus every one that is perfect is holy, and every one that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect.

“Yet we may, lastly, observe, that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no perfection of degrees, as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to “grow in grace,” [2 Pet. 3:18] and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Savior. [see Phil. 1:9]”

A simpler way to say that comes from a 1969 pop tune by Spiral Staircase which proclaimed in the refrain, “I love you more today than yesterday; but not as much as tomorrow.” Love can be full and complete one day and still grow greater the next.

The Bible tells us in 1 John 4:8 that “God is love.” Because God is love, love, like God, is infinite. We can be completely filled with love today and still have it grow tomorrow. In fact, I would argue that with every day we don’t grow in love, love becomes a smaller and smaller percentage of our whole selves; because we are growing whether or not our love grows to fill each new space. We become less perfect, less complete, with every passing day.

A tree that is not growing is dying; and we are in that sense like trees. Wesley is arguing that if we should attain perfection and then sit back to bask in it, we lose the perfection pretty much instantly. Perfection doesn’t just take work to achieve; it takes continued, conscious effort to maintain.

I wish Wesley had used the rest of that sermon to elaborate on that; and to be fair, he comes back to it in other sermons, which I’ll get to in a minute. But, for the rest of this early sermon, he focuses on the thing that really upsets people, which is to insist that perfection means being without sin. Here on earth. As a human being.

In paragraph after paragraph in the sermon, he answers objections from the biblical accounts of God’s greatest servants committing major sins with the rejoinder of, essentially, “well just because Moses or David or Peter or Paul didn’t achieve perfection doesn’t mean that no Christian ever did or couldn’t in the future attain such a goal.”

While I disagree with Wesley on a number of things, I do think he’s right on this—at least in theory—and I appreciate the pitfalls on the other side of the argument for those who want to say Wesley is wrong. If it were *not* possible to live without sin, we’d have a built-in excuse for whatever we do, and we hear it daily. “Well, I’m only human.” Or, “I was just following orders.”

In some ways, it can be argued that any hope for real justice and peace in the world is built on the belief that there are at least a critical few people on this earth who will stand up to the threats and pressure and do the right thing for the world, despite enormous personal cost. It remains to be seen whether there are enough.

And, whether or not anyone can do the right thing even frequently, let alone always; such courage is rarely, if ever, found in those who haven’t first had a lot of practice making good choices in the smaller things. As Jesus says in Luke 16:10, “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.”

We don’t really need Jesus to tell us that; just look around. Interact with others. Being faithful in small things doesn’t guarantee that we won’t crack under the enormous pressure of the big things. But those people have a better chance of standing up when the going gets rough than those who never met an easy road they didn’t take.

Related to that, Wesley’s insistence that we can reach a point of being sinless in this life, also makes the life of Jesus more relevant. If Jesus was not just fully divine, but also fully human, as Christian doctrine teaches, then he was not incapable of sin. And who knows—this is probably heresy, but maybe some of the problematic passages from Jesus’ early ministry were actually Jesus not being his best self. I mean, he cursed and killed a fig tree because he was hungry and it had no figs—even though figs were not in season. It’s like cursing a blueberry bush in January. Poor tree was doing its best!

The last verse of Luke 2 sums up Jesus’ boyhood by saying, “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” It’s at least worth thinking about how we might relate to Jesus if what the Gospels show us is not a

baby perfect from birth, but a baby who, through the power of the Spirit that filled him at his baptism, moved on to perfection.

What if the Gospels are showing us the whole process, culminating in a man who led his disciples along a stony path, despite the massive political and religious pressure to abandon his attempts to upend the power structures of greed and oppression, and then made his last, perfect decision to be killed rather than to kill, to love both the thief who died beside him and those who drove in the nails.

I think there's a way in which a Jesus that was not born perfect but who became perfect—who moved on to perfection—step by step, choice by choice, across his 33 years is a more potent example for us to follow. If Jesus was actually incapable of sin, then what are we even doing trying to be like him? I don't have a better answer for that than Wesley's; and believe me, I've tried to find one.

The alternative to human beings being capable of perfection is also a denigration of the Holy Spirit. Wesley didn't believe that people could become sinless on their own. Nope, not a chance. His teaching was that perfection was possible only through our conscious decision to let the Holy Spirit direct our lives, together with our consistent effort to manifest the fruit of the Spirit by our actions.

So, I guess what I'm saying is that I agree with Wesley in theory. But I do wish Wesley had spent more time on the process and less on the goal. And I wish he had spent more time with the Greek word that the King James translates as "perfect" or "perfection." The Greek words are all forms of the word *telos*, which means "finished, complete, and whole." And that brings a whole different feeling to the passages in the Bible that encourage or command it. "Be perfect" is a goal that produces anxiety. "Be complete," rings in my ears as a goal that promises relief.

Still, though, while the word "perfect" in Greek means "complete," completion doesn't necessarily imply holiness. Completing our destructive behavior is hardly what Wesley had in mind. And that's why the question to new ordinands asks, "Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?"

As I was wrestling with that question with friends and colleagues before my ordination, most of them told me to just get over myself, smile, and say "Yes." But a not insignificant number of others seemed to think that the addition of "in love" was some kind of escape hatch—that we didn't have to be sinless, we just had to be loving. That misses Wesley's point. Wesley believed that love was the means to eliminating sin from our lives.

In Wesley's 1777 pamphlet on Christian perfection, he looks back over all his sermons and teaching on the topic, and he pulls out a section from a very early sermon—from 1733—called "Circumcision of the Heart." He recalls this section, where he draws together a number of Bible passages.

"Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.' It is not only 'the first and great' command, but all the commandments in one. 'Whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise,' they are all comprised in this one word, love. In this is perfection, and glory, and happiness: The royal law of heaven and earth is this, 'Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' The one perfect good shall be your one ultimate end."

Fair enough. Jesus made that crystal clear, as had everyone since Moses, which is where we first read the commandments to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. But in that 1777 document, Wesley jumps from that early sermon to a pamphlet he published a decade later which shows how all that is supposed to work:

"And loving God, he 'loves his neighbor as himself;' he loves every man as his own soul. He loves his enemies, yea, and the enemies of God. And if it be not in his power to 'do good to them that hate' him, yet he ceases not to 'pray for them,' though they spurn his love, and still 'despise, fully use him, and persecute him.'

"For he is 'pure in heart.' Love has purified his heart from envy, malice, wrath, and every unkind temper. It has cleansed him from pride, whereof 'only cometh contention;' and he hath now 'put on bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering.' And indeed all possible ground for contention, on his part, is cut off. For none can take from him what he desires, seeing he 'loves not the world, nor any of the things of the world;' but 'all his desire is unto God, and to the remembrance of his name.'

In Wesley's thought, perfect love would so fill us that there would be no room for all the stumbling blocks that typically trip us up. To be made perfect in love doesn't mean, "Sin all you want and it won't matter as long as you also love

others.” He’s saying instead that sin is evidence of imperfect love; and love is the mechanic by which we become sinless. So that to become perfect in love is the thing that wipes out our ability to sin.

In other words, don’t focus on trying not to lie or cheat or steal or whatever else you keep trying to stop doing and can’t; but instead focus on increasing your capacity for love and all the rest will, over time, eliminate itself. It’s the reason that over a millennium before John Wesley, St. Augustine could give the advice, “Love God, and do as you please.” It’s not that love balances out sin—it’s that love acts as a purifying fire that cleans us from the inside out. Becoming perfect in love is the means by which we become without sin.

I don’t think that makes the whole project easier. It might even be harder. But it is gentler and more likely to yield positive results. If we’re trying to become a better person and keep messing up, it’s easy to just get down on ourselves and give up. Self-loathing creeps in, which we either turn inward in some form of self-harm or self-sabotage, or we project our failure outward in judgment of others and destroy relationships instead.

Focusing on the particular point of failure is like trying hard not to think of a pink elephant. It’s a psychological trap. If we focus on the thing we want to quit doing, that’s all we’ll think about until it consumes us and we give in and then we hate ourselves for it and lash out at either ourselves or others. Augustine, Wesley, Paul, and Jesus affirm the Torah in saying that the Law is fulfilled only if we focus on love—loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves; because they are all, when lived in the real world, the same thing.

Loving God isn’t manifest in how giddy we feel when singing worship songs, although that kind of rapture isn’t wrong. It’s just not evidence. Love is manifest in the concrete acts of love we exhibit toward both our neighbors, including the neighbors who are our enemies, and ourselves. Increasing love—that is increasing the number and depth of those actions, will decrease sin, because the source of all love is God and God is perfect. Complete. Whole.

Another benefit in turning away from our particular vices and toward love is that it puts us on equal footing with everyone else. We’re all trying to do the same thing for the same reason because every one of our vices, however different they look on the outside, is rooted in the same problem. Every bit of brokenness in our world—in ourselves as individuals and collectively as churches, corporations, and nations—it all represents the imperfect nature of our love.

We have a climate and environmental crisis because we have loved too little of the world and all that live here. We have political crises spilling into violence and war because we have not been willing or able to extend our love to those who are different in any number of ways. We have crises in both physical and mental health because we no longer know how to truly love ourselves.

The good news is that the answer to every single crisis we face is more love. If you find yourself thinking, “why can’t I ever seem to get this right?” change your question to “where do I need to increase my love?” That’s not always an easy question to answer, but searching for it will do more for the issue than focusing on whatever keeps going wrong.

And the best news is that we aren’t alone in that effort. We recognized that in the baptismal liturgy this morning as I placed my hands on Liliana and Madelynn and said, “May the Holy Spirit work within you that you may become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.” Another way to say that is, “May the Holy Spirit work within you that you may move on to perfection in love in this life.” Because, who knows? With the Spirit’s help, and with our help as their new family in Christ, either of these precious girls might just do it. Amen.