

**Changing The World (According To John Wesley)**  
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**Revelation 2:1a, 2a, 4-5a (NRSV)**

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: . . . "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. . . . But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.

Despite what some of you heard --- last Sunday's sermon was not about self-loathing

I am not a bad person  
Nor am I a perfect person

I am a flawed child of God

And just like you, God has great plans for me.

HOWEVER, --- unless we recognize and combat the demons in our lives --- we will never be able to change the world ---- let alone ourselves.

I have demons to combat --- and God is helping me to defeat them so that I can do those things that God has called me to do. ---- that is all that I was saying . . .

Did you listen to the scripture that was read this morning?

Listen again to these challenging words:

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The Christian Church today is suffering from exactly what the author of the Book of Revelation was writing about.

Dr. Martin Luther King may have summed up this passage best when he said:

Any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.

"The church" has lost sight of its mission

It has become --- like the old Pink Floyd song --- "Comfortably Numb"

"The church" has lost its spiritual center --- because it has gotten too busy majoring on unimportant things.

My life has often gone through ebbs and flows of spiritual vitality.

I have experienced periods that the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish mystic, St John of the Cross called: "The Dark Night of the Soul"

When that happens --- I find myself with a couple of choices

- do nothing and try to wait it out
- enjoy the wandering in the wilderness
- throw myself into spiritual practices to try and fill the void

What I have found is when I am in that place I too, am often majoring on the things that aren't truly important

Staying focused is not always easy for me

It is too easy to get distracted by things that just don't matter

When I get distracted I find two things that really help to bring me back

First, finding a devotional type of book for me

I don't know if you realize it, but virtually every book I read, I read with an eye toward one of two things

Can this make a good small group study book?

How can I use this for preaching?

I really don't read just to read

Although my son in law (wow not sure I have ever called Sam that before) gave me Ron Chernow's new book on Grant for Christmas and I am about half way through it.

Second, getting back to a habit that I do off and on --- and that is journaling

I picked up Anne Lamott's book GRACE EVENTUALLY, a book, that had been gathering dust beside my bed and have been reading one chapter every day and then journaling about what is going on in my life and how the spirit is nudging me through these devotions.

It has been amazing --- and it is part of the reason that you are stuck with all this self-reflection by me.

I was sharing this with a clergy friend of mine and he said to me:

"It's hard to grow ourselves spiritually when we are so busy trying to find things for others spiritual growth and neglecting our own."

And he is so right!

John Wesley is the spiritual founder of the Methodist movement.

He was born in 1703 in Epworth, England about 150 miles north of London.

He was the 15th child of Samuel and Susanna Wesley

Samuel Wesley was a graduate of the University of Oxford, and since 1696, had been parish priest of Epworth.

He had married Susanna, the twenty-fifth child of Samuel Annesley, a Dissenting minister, in 1689.

Samuel and Suzanna had nineteen children, of which nine lived beyond infancy.

When John was a child of 5, on February 9, 1709, the parsonage at Epworth burned --- some suggest that angry members of the church may have started the fire --- regardless of how it started --- young John was left sleeping in his bed on the second floor while the rest of the children were all ushered to safety.

With the stairs burning, and the roof about to collapse, John was plucked from a second story window by two men, one standing on top of the other.

Later, Susanna would describe the experience saying that John was "a brand plucked from the burning." (quoting Zachariah 3:2)

That experience, was one that shaped the rest of his life.

England in the 18th century was not all that different than today.

England was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, and the middle class was shrinking --- the rich were getting richer --- while the poor were growing in larger and larger numbers --- and getting poorer and poorer.

Religion seemed to be losing influence on the culture.

The protestant revolution, which began with Martin Luther nailing his 95 thesis (attacks against Roman Catholicism) on the door to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany --- had been raging for 200 years.

People were forced to choose who they would be loyal to: The Pope or Luther and his Protestants.

But in England the situation was even a little more interesting, and confusing.

If you know your history, you remember a man named Henry VIII ---- Henry, like all kings, needed a male heir. But his wife kept producing girls or still born children.

Eventually Henry would divorce his wife and begin a long string of failed marriages that always seemed to end with a dead wife.

England then suffered through Bloody Mary and the Elizabethan age.

A period of religious persecution --- that could get you dead if you belonged to the wrong group.

Because of this 200 year period of religious turmoil --- many people had grown weary of religion and the Church.

The age of enlightenment brought scientific reason and skepticism toward religion and all things supernatural.

It was into this world that John Wesley was born.

John's father Samuel was pastor of St Andrews Church in Epworth for almost 40 years.

But as was typical in that day, John and his siblings were taught by their mother.

What was unusual was that she insisted that the girls too learn to read, and write.

Education was very important in the Wesley home.

Susanna's influence on John cannot be underestimated.

She instilled in him many of the values that would come to dominate his ministry the rest of his life.

One of the things that Susanna did with each of her children was spend an hour with each one of them --- she asked them about their faith --- their fears --- their hopes and dreams --- she asked about the state of their souls.

This practice becomes the genesis of Wesley's small groups in which each participant shared with each other and held one another accountable.

They asked each other: "How is your soul?"

John also was given another gift from his parents --- and that was how to preserve in the midst of conflict.

It was not an easy time to be religious in England --- people were deeply divided.

Much like today people seemed to be separated into two camps

While they weren't

Red and Blue

Fundamentalist or progressives

Liberals or conservatives

But they were divided

Tories and Whigs

conformers and dissenters

Anglicans and puritans

And that division, as we all know --- drains us of our spiritual vitality

Sometimes we just want to throw up our hands and give up

But Wesley --- because of his upbringing --- found a different way.

Wesley once wrote:

Would to God that all the party names and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world were forgot; and that we might all agree to sit down together as humble, loving disciples, at the feet of our common Master, to hear his word, to imbibe his Spirit, and to transcribe his life in our own.

In a sermon he once said:

Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may.

Wesley offered us another way --- one in which we listen to each other --- focusing not on where we disagree --- but instead identifying our common ground.

He showed us how to build bridges and not walls.

We learn to assume the best of each other --- and not the worst!

We give people the benefit of the doubt.

We listen more and talk less.

Adam Hamilton in his book Revival writes:

We have forgotten how to listen, as individuals, as churches, and as a nation. Liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, progressives and fundamentalists find it easy to demonize others. The mark of those early Methodists, and a key element of personal and corporate revival in the twenty-first century, is a willingness to see the good in others, hold our positions with humility, and treat others with respect. It is a willingness to make our hearts pliable in God's hands. It is a willingness to follow the highest calling of Christians, which is both a prerequisite and the goal of revival: love.

John Wesley's life was never easy.

But if there was one hallmark of it --- it was that he never gave up!

Even when things seemed to be crashing around him.

As his family reflected on the fire in the parsonage at Epworth --- they came to see God's hand in it. They believed that God had spared John for a special purpose.

I, like every other pastor, have sometimes received difficult letters from parishioners. Sometimes they have been sent to me, other times I have been copied because they were sent to the bishop.

And while I have gotten frustrated at times, and wanted to throw in the towel --- you have never set my house on fire, like they did to John's house

John never gave up.

Even when he failed --- and he often did --- he preserved.

If we want revival in our lives.

If we want revival in our church.

If we want revival in our nation ----

It must start with you

Without a humble spirit --- one willing to see growth opportunities --- we will never have the opportunity to change the world.

John Wesley changed the world --- we are products of his vision.

Let us not:

abandon the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.