

Seeking Holiness
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1 Peter 1:13-16 (NRSV)

Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

This morning I am continuing our journey through John Wesley's life by focusing on the concept of HOLINESS.

Holiness is one of those "funny" words ---
We all think we want it
But we are not really sure what it is
Or how we get it

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines Holiness as: "the quality or state of being holy"

Wait a minute --- I was always taught by my teachers that you can't define a word by using a form of the word.

That was the definition for the noun "holiness" but it later goes on and describes the same word but as an adjective.

"Emphasizing the doctrine of the second blessing; *specifically*: of or relating to a perfectionist movement arising in United States Protestantism in the late 19th century"

Like most definitions of theological concepts, it doesn't help a lot but it points us in the right direction.

And they are wrong in ascribing the perfectionist movement as something that arose in the US in the late 19th Century

"Holiness" came to be a term found within the Methodist Movement to help describe Wesley's instance that we all must move toward perfection. The only way we could do that is by living in a state of Holiness.

Are you all confused already?

Let's go back to the life of John Wesley and see how he began to live out this concept.

Obviously the roots of Holiness/perfection are found at the apron strings of his mother Susanna. The lessons that she taught at home to her children were all rooted around being in a right relationship with God.

Do you remember the question I shared last week? Susanna would ask each of her children every week when she met with them privately this powerful question.

How is it with your soul?

If you ask me, that is the root of Wesley's understanding and expectation that all Christians be on the path to perfection or holiness.

But getting there required many winding roads along the way.

When John was ten years old, he left the safety and security of the parsonage in Epworth and traveled the 150 miles or so south to London and Charterhouse School.

It was there that he began his formal education.

As John reflected back on this experience, 25 years later in his journal --- an important habit that he developed --- we wrote about the experience.

As you read the entry --- you realize that John was a pretty typical kid of his day growing up.

But he says he became convinced that salvation was found in 3 things.

1. Not being so bad as other people
2. having still a kindness for religion
3. reading the bible, going to church, and saying my prayers

After finishing at the Charterhouse --- John began his studies at the University.

At the age of 17, in 1720, John began his studies at Christ Church --- which is one of the most prestigious colleges that make up Oxford University.

And again --- according to his biographers --- John Wesley was a pretty typical college student -- he did the kinds of things that college students did in 1720.

Education was the opportunity for the upper class and the clergy in Wesley's day --- so his decision to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandparents really wasn't all that surprising.

So following graduation, John began studying for his master's degree but also began preparing for ordination.

At this point he seemed to want to become an academic --- and realized that ordination was important since most of the professors at Oxford were ordained.

This inward reflection that Wesley was going through as he prepared for his ordination seemed to lead him into a deeper spiritual quest.

Around this time he read Jeremy Taylor's book: *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living*. It seems to have had a profound impact on him.

Wesley was drawn to a passage from 1 Corinthians 10:31 that was highlighted in Taylor's book:

1 Corinthians 10:31 (NRSV)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

Taylor laid out the concept that everything that we do --- should be an act of worship and prayer and is thus religious.

This concept cut Wesley deeply to the core.

He also began to realize that we as Christians often alter the ending of the Lord's Prayer without even being consciously aware of it.

That final phrase in the doxology of the prayer:

"For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory."

He began to believe that sin had caused many of us to pray it not that way --- but rather:

"Mine is the kingdom and the power and the glory."

I think a lot of us have that inner drive for affirmation --- praise --- recognition --- as I shared last week.

And it probably really is a good thing --- because it is one of those things that help motivate us to get things done --- the problem is when it becomes our PRIMARY MOTIVATION.

When that happens we have strayed from giving God the glory and instead desire the glory for ourselves.

Sometimes in our desire to be in the "holy" relationship with God we work harder, seek to do more --- thinking that will draw us closer to God.

That is certainly what John Wesley did.

In his early years following Oxford, Wesley became one of "those people" --- you know what I mean --- one of those people who think that they are getting it all right --- who thinks they know it all --- who thinks your relationship with God has to be a carbon copy of theirs.

And then it all crashed in around him.

In 1735, John Wesley made the fateful decision to come to America.

He arrived in Savannah at the British Colony of Georgia.

But it was the trip over that began the domino pieces falling that would transform Wesley's life and understanding of God.

Obviously, the passage over to America was by ship --- and John Wesley was terrified of the sea.

It was a three month long journey and through-out the journey they were beset by terrible storms.

John was convinced he would die

He began to question his faith

On January 25, 1736 (282 years ago this Thursday) John recorded in his journal what was the climax of the voyage and the terrible storms that they encountered.

The mainsail was in tatters, waves washed over the ship, and the water "poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up." He observed that the English passengers were screaming in terror, as he was, but a group of German Moravians calmly sang a psalm. (Revival, Hamilton)

Wesley was never the same after that experience.

He began to focus **inward** on the inner assurance that can only come from God. He realized that he had been focusing on outward assurance and it did not comfort.

Two years later, this experience came to full bloom when Wesley had what we today call his Aldersgate Experience.

Despite the seeds that were planted in Wesley's heart --- his experience in America was nothing short of a disaster.

He struggled mightily with how to connect his desire for Holiness and how to convert others. In many ways he missed the whole point of what he was trying to teach

What was still lacking in Wesley's life --- will be the subject in a couple of weeks --- GRACE.

But let me just say:

It is next to impossible to treat others with grace if you have yet to fully experience it. And Wesley had yet to fully experience or embrace grace.

I find this period in Wesley's life one of the most fascinating, and I could talk about it for hours --- but sadly we cannot.

All of these experiences however, were the proving grounds as he struggled to understand what HOLINESS was all about.

If you really want to understand Wesley and his struggles you can read his sermon/treaties that is found on the web entitled: *[A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-plain-account-of-christian-perfection/)*
(<http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-plain-account-of-christian-perfection/>)

In the midst of it Wesley wrote:

"I saw that giving even all my life to God . . . would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to him."

But in some ways, it is in a sermon that Wesley preached that he clearly articulates what it means to seek holiness in our relationship with God.

It was preached to the students and professors at St Mary's Church in Oxford.

Wesley seems to be challenging all of us not to be **ALMOST CHRISTIANS** --- but instead to become what he called an "Altogether Christian."

The style of this part of the sermon almost sounds like it could come from an African-American church of today with its rhetorical questions asked with great passion and in a rapid fire format.

This is how Wesley defined what it means to be fully Christian as he challenges us with these questions!

Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?
Can you cry out, "My God, and my All"?
Do you desire nothing but him?
Are you happy in God?
Is he your glory, your delight, your crown of rejoicing?

And is this commandment written in your heart, "That he who loveth God love his brother also"

Do you then love your neighbour as yourself?

Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul as Christ loved you?

Yea, dost thou believe that Christ loved thee, and gave himself for thee?

Hast thou faith in his blood, Believest thou the Lamb of God hath taken away thy sins, and cast them as a stone into the depth of the sea that he hath blotted out the handwriting that was against thee, taking it out of the way, nailing it to his cross

Hast thou indeed redemption through his blood, even the remission of thy sins

And doth his Spirit bear witness with thy spirit, that thou art a child of God

It was in the formation of small groups that Wesley believed that they questions can move off the paper and into our hearts and lives.

We need people to hold us accountable

We need people who will love us as we stumble

We need people who will encourage us to grow

That is all found in the small accountability groups that became so central to the Methodist movement and are still central today.

This movement toward holiness --- toward perfection is a lifelong quest.

It is moving religion from our heads and placing God in the center of our hearts and in all that we do.

As I putting this together, I came across a website that provided some interesting insight into perfection.

One of the author's central agreements is that John Wesley really didn't create this idea of perfection.

And I would agree.

It certainly is found in the passage we looked at from 1 Corinthians, and also in 1 Peter

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But that it really is found in that central tenant of our faith --- the Shema

Do you remember it?

Or maybe, as I like to call it --- the Jesus Creed.

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And You shall love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these.

Living "in Christ" has always been the goal of the Christian faith --- Wesley just helped us to find ways to do it.

If it is your goal --- to seek holiness or perfection --- let me suggest some questions you need to learn to ask yourself on a regular basis.

How does this action, word, thought affect my relationship with God?
How does this action, word, thought affect God's ability to love others through me?
How am I fitting God into every aspect of my life for God's sake?
Is God a major factor in everything I do, say, think, and feel?

Matt shared with you in his email Friday these same questions, but in a bit more modern language that would really be helpful for us to ask ourselves.

Did the Bible live in me today?
Do I give the Bible time to speak to me every day?
Am I enjoying prayer?
When did I last speak to someone else about my faith?
Is Christ real to me?

These really are great reflection questions for us to ask ourselves daily, weekly, or monthly.

As followers of Jesus, our goal must be to strive for holiness.

It is not always easy to answer those questions in the affirmative, but we (as the church) are striving to help you along your journey.

During the season of Lent (that starts in just a few weeks) we are going to look at the Psalms both on Sunday mornings and in small groups (on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings) and inviting you to use the Psalms to help you grow in your walk with Jesus.