

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series***“Works of Mercy”***

[James 2:14-18](#)

This is week five of a six-week sermon series called, “Revival.” We are reviewing the life and teachings of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement that brought a revival to the churches and Christians in England during the 18th century and in America during the 19th century.

So far, we have learned about Wesley’s family and educational background, which laid a solid foundation for his faith and character. We have looked at the period of his failed ministry in America that eventually led him to his conversion experience at Aldersgate and to the beginning of the church revival. Last Sunday, we examined the threefold grace of God John taught: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Today, we will go back to the last of the three expressions of God’s grace - sanctifying grace - to better understand Wesley’s teaching on the life we, the Methodists, are called to live.

As we discussed last week, sanctifying grace is the grace that helps us become sanctified. In other words, through sanctifying grace, we grow and mature in our faith, leading a holy life and becoming a better person. At the moment of being justified, or when we accept Christ as our Lord and savior, we begin a new spiritual journey which leads us to become Christ-like. And as Jesus Christ is holy, so we, too, are called to be holy. Being holy is a mandate for God’s people that we find throughout scripture. In the Old Testament, Leviticus 19:2 says, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Wesley called this process of Christian believers gradually becoming Christ-like and holy, being perfected in Christian love, “sanctification.”

How does sanctification happen to us? According to Wesley, all aspects of God’s grace - prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace - are God’s gift for us. We freely receive this gift of God through the work of the Holy Spirit. However, the last dimension of God’s grace requires our response to it. To experience sanctification, we must participate in the process of spiritual growth. Wesley taught people that our participation is done through works of piety and works of mercy. As the Holy Spirit guides us, we love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. As the Holy Spirit leads us, we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As we continue the works of piety and mercy, following the Holy Spirit, we grow in our ability to live as Christ lived, and we become Christ-like and holy. So, we can understand the process of sanctification as a partnership between the Holy Spirit and the Christian believer.

For Wesley, these two sides to sanctification, works of piety and works of mercy, could not be understood apart from each other, like two sides of the same coin. Through works of piety, such as prayer, meditation, fasting, worship, reading and studying the Bible and other spiritual materials, receiving the Holy Communion, and meeting with other Christian believers in small groups, we stay in love with God. We grow and mature spiritually and lead a holy life. And, the same thing happens when we reach out to people who are in need and help them. Through works of mercy, such as feeding the hungry, providing drink for the thirsty, ministering to the homeless, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the

prisoner, as specified in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 25:31-46), we grow and mature as Christian believers. We become closer to God's holiness and perfection in love.

Sanctification through works of both piety and mercy, that is what the apostle James teaches in today's scripture reading. Let's hear it again:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

From early on in his Christian faith journey, John Wesley considered works of mercy as an essential part of Christian faith. With his brother Charles and other members of the Holy Club at Oxford University, John ministered to prisoners, visited the elderly, cared for the poor, and helped them and their children with education. Each of the 7 days of the week was designated to at least one of these works of mercy.

For Wesley and the early Methodists, education for the poor was one of the top priorities of their ministry. At Oxford, Wesley and his Holy Club members hired a tutor to help poor children. When he began to preach outdoors in Kingswood, a mining town outside the city of Bristol, Wesley built a school for the children of poor miners that was open to everyone. This tradition of providing good education for underprivileged children continued as the Methodist movement spread across America. And, the Methodist pioneers' emphasis on education resulted in hundreds of Methodist colleges and universities in the US and around the world. As I mentioned in my sermon a few weeks ago, there are eighty eight 4-year United Methodist colleges and universities in the US today. According to a recent report, 13 of them ranked among the top 100 in Liberal Arts schools.

Wesley and the early Methodists' works of mercy included providing basic medical care and housing for the poor, especially the elderly and widows and their children. When he realized that medicine was available only to the wealthy in England, Wesley even published a book with practical medical advice to help people who could not afford to see private doctors. As Methodism spread, hundreds, if not thousands of medical clinics and hospitals were started by Methodists across England, America, and around the world. And, they are still excellent medical institutions with great reputations.

Today, conservative or evangelical churches tend to focus more on works of piety, leaving aside works of mercy. They are passionate about growing in personal relationship with Jesus and having an assurance of personal salvation. Caring for the poor is often limited to their own members. In contrast, liberal or progressive churches tend to focus on works of mercy. They are committed to various ministries of helping and serving others in need in the community and the world. Yet, they often neglect works of piety.

But, for us, the Methodists, works of piety and works of mercy are equally important. We, the Christian believers in the Wesleyan tradition, are called to sanctification through works of both piety and mercy.

We are not either/or, but both/and Christians. In today's political environment, we tend to divide people into two categories, liberal or conservative. According to dictionary definitions, being conservative means valuing tradition, and being liberal means open to new behavior or opinions. Perhaps we can only be at our best when we embrace both and seek a balance between the two poles, instead of choosing one or the other.

Works of piety without works of mercy becomes spiritual narcissism and arrogance. James says, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Yet, works of mercy without works of piety leaves us unable to be transformed by them because, as Paul says in Ephesians, "... we are what he [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life." (Ephesians 2:10)

Brothers and Sisters, do you want your faith to be alive? Do you want to grow and mature as a Christian? Do you want to experience transformation in your life? Then, may we follow the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, which seeks to lead us toward sanctification, the journey to become Christ-like and holy. In responding to the invitation to walk the journey of Christian perfection, may we listen to the voices of our spiritual ancestors, who remind us that we are to engage in both works of piety and mercy. If we are seeking to experience revival in our hearts, in our congregation and in the world, may we remember to be a people who embrace the both/and, and not the either/or.
Amen!