

“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 55 – “Christian Perfection and John Wesley” (Part 6), Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on October 18th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

Psalm 130: 1-8 – Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word I do hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning—Yes, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

Last week we looked at the first of 3 of John Wesley’s errors regarding the subject of Christian Perfection. It was –

a. He believes that God is willing to give us complete holiness in this life.

Today we want to look at 2 more errors if we have time. They are:

b. Wesley believes that we can be completely delivered from sin in this life:

He says: “But the great question is, whether there is any promise in Scripture, that we shall be saved from sin?” “Undoubtedly there is.” “Such is that promise, Psalm 130, verse 8: “He shall redeem Israel from all his sins”; exactly answerable to those words of the angel; ‘He shall save His people from their sins.’ “And surely ‘He is able to save unto the uttermost, them that come unto God through Him.’ “Such is the glorious promise given through the prophet Ezekiel in Chapter 36, verses 25-27: Then I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you.” “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.” “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” “Such (to mention no more) is that pronounced by Zechariah, Luke 1: 73-75, “The oath which He swore to our father Abraham, that He would grant unto us, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, (and doubtless are all of our sins) to serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.” “The last part of this promise is peculiarly worthy of our observation.” “Lest any should say, “True, we shall be saved from our sins when we die”, that clause is remarkably added, as if on purpose to obviate this pretense – “All the days of our life.” “With what modesty then can anyone affirm, ‘that none shall enjoy this liberty till death.’”

Our Response to this: Let us consider more carefully Psalm 130 which he quotes from in this sermon.

The thing that he has not sufficiently thought about in relation to that statement, “He shall redeem Israel from all his sins”, is that it does not mean that a Christian will be delivered from the presence of sin in his heart; which is called “the flesh” in many places in the New Testament Scriptures. It means that because of Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrifice at the cross that all of His people will be forgiven and their consciences cleansed from all their sins in an on-going sense all their days. The truth is, that every Christian will invariably commit some sins as they go about to do God’s will in every particular, in their obedience to Him. But the Lord will be faithful to “redeem them from all their iniquities” is the way that it reads; all the guilt of their

sins will be taken away, each and every time they sin. And as they confess their sins of their heart and their actions, they will be cleansed by the blood of Christ; they will be redeemed from all their iniquities in this holy and wonderful on-going sense.

It is not, as Wesley is suggesting, that they will be free from “the law in their members”, the presence of indwelling, remaining corruption of flesh and spirit for one moment while they live in the body. In fact, in verses 3 and 4 of that Psalm, it says: “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” The implied answer is that no one could stand. “But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.” This is why the psalmist waited and hoped in the Lord. It was the reality that with the Lord there was mercy, and with Him, abundant redemption. The perfection is all on God’s side, the imperfections in our obedience are from us. God does cleanse our hearts day by day from the guilt of sin, and the thoughts and motions of sin which proceed from our heart, but he does not eradicate the presence of sin from our being. That is reserved for the day of our death. And this is the reason why he says that He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities. God will indeed redeem us from all of our iniquities; Christ has purchased our washing in regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. And He has bought us back from our slavery to sin so that we are free to now pursue holiness and righteousness. And further, He cleanses from all unrighteousness daily as we confess our sins. And one glorious day, the day of our death, He will remove all sin from our spirit. But for now let us remember the following verses.

1st John 1: 8 and 9 – “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Ecclesiastes 7: 20 – “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.”

c. Sin, in Wesley’s thinking, is - A Voluntary Transgression of a Known Law.

“Suffer me to ask one question more. Why should any man of reason and religion, be either afraid of, or averse to, salvation from all sin? Is not sin the greatest evil on this side hell? And if so, does it not naturally follow, that an entire deliverance from it is one of the greatest blessings on this side heaven? How earnestly then should it be prayed for by all the children of God! By sin I mean, a voluntary transgression of a known law. Are you averse to being delivered from this? Are you afraid of such a deliverance? Do you then love sin, that you are so unwilling to part with it? Surely no. You do not love either the devil or his works. You rather wish to be totally delivered from them: to have sin rooted out both of your life and your heart.” P. 398 of Wesley’s Sermons in 3 Volumes, Vol. 2, 1831.

My response: No doubt this is the true Christian’s desire – to have sin rooted out both of your life and your heart. No Christian should be averse to the idea of being saved from all sin. We truly look forward to it. The real question is whether the Bible promises that entire deliverance from sin can really take place in any Christian’s life, before death. The answer is – It certainly will not.

He says a little later in the sermon – “I apprehend the scriptural definition of sin, to be a voluntary transgression of a known law.” You will say to me – “Nay, but all transgressions of the law of God, whether voluntary or involuntary are sin: for St. John says, “All sin is a transgression of the law.” “True, but he does not say, “All transgression of the law is sin.” “This I deny: let him prove it that can.” “To say the truth, this is a mere strife of words.” “You say ‘None is saved from

sin in your sense of the word; but I do not admit of that sense, because the word is never so taken in Scripture.” “And you cannot destroy the possibility of being saved from sin, in my sense of the word.” “And this is the sense wherein the word sin is over and again taken in Scripture.”

This “sense” of the definition of sin that Wesley is contending for, is that sin is a “voluntary transgression of a known law”. And this relates to a person’s perceiving themselves to have kept, and that they are keeping, this known law perfectly; that is, without sinning against God or man. It is Wesley’s understanding of what sin is that allows him to think that a person can reach perfection; be free from sin, in their obedience before God. They may attain this state and be in it all their days he says, when they reach that point. I believe that Wesley is fooling himself and misleading others.

What we really need to understand is this:

The imperfections that exist in the believer’s life and obedience do not mean that our service to God is not accepted or acceptable to Him. It is accepted, with the imperfections attendant to it, because of Christ’s righteousness imputed to us and to our works.

Luke 17: 7-10 – “And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, “Come at once and sit down to eat?” But will he not rather say to him, “Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?” “Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him?” “I think not.” “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants.’ “We have done what was our duty to do.”

A.W. Pink says: “A readiness of disposition is what God regards, and that disposition is judged by Him according to the resources which are at its command. Our Father estimates what we render unto Him — by the purity of our intentions. Little is regarded as much — when love prompts it. If the heart is really in it, the offering is well pleasing to Him whether it is but “two young pigeons” (Luke 2:24), or tens of thousands of oxen and sheep (1 Kings 8:63).

“The Covenant of Grace insists not so much upon the measure and degree of our obedience, as on the quality and nature of every degree — that it is sincere and upright” — Ezekiel Hopkins (1634-1690). In contrast with legal obedience — evangelical obedience consists of honest aims and genuine efforts, striving to live holily, and to walk closely with God — that is according to the rules He has prescribed in His Word, and, according to the gracious condescension — is received and rewarded by God for Christ’s sake. That holy purposes and sincere resolutions are accepted by God — though they are not really accomplished — is clear from what is recorded of Abraham: namely, that “he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar” (Jam 2:21), for he never actually “offered up” Isaac, except in intention and willingness. Upon which Thomas Manton said: “God counts that to be done which is about to be done, and takes notice of what is in the heart — though it is not brought to practice and realization. Yet not idle purposes when men hope to do tomorrow, what should and can be done today.” “We labor, that, whether present [at home in the body] or absent, we may be accepted of him” (2 Corinthians 5:9) — must be our grand and constant endeavor.

Another example to the point is the case of David, who desired and planned to provide a more suitable dwelling-place for JEHOVAH in Israel’s midst. As Solomon, at a later date, declared: “But the LORD said to David my father, ‘Forasmuch as it was in your heart to build a

house for my name — you did well in that it was in your heart” (2 Chronicles 6:8). God graciously accepted the will for the deed, and credited His servant with the same. So it is with evangelical obedience: that which is truly sincere and is prompted by love unto God, though very imperfect — He graciously accepts as perfect. When He appeared before Abraham, the father of all those who believe, He declared, “I am the Almighty [all-sufficient] God; walk before me, and be perfect” (Gen 17:1) — which, in the margin, is accurately and helpfully rendered, “upright or sincere”, for absolute perfection is in this life impossible. Legal obedience was approved by justice; evangelical obedience is acceptable unto mercy. The former was according to the unabated rigor of the Law, which owned nothing short of a conformity without defect or intermission. Whereas the latter is received by God through Christ, according to the milder dispensation of the Gospel (Gal 3:8).” — Taken from his article on Evangelical Obedience, November, 1949.

Listen to Thomas Brooks on this Sincere Obedience — “In the covenant of works, God required perfect obedience in our own persons; but in the covenant of grace God will be content if there be but uprightness in us, if there be but sincere desires to obey, if there be faithful endeavors to obey, if there be a hearty willingness to obey. Well, saith God, though I stood upon perfect obedience in the covenant of works, 2 Cor. viii.12 ; yet now I will be satisfied with the will for the deed; if there be but uprightness of heart; though that be attended with many weaknesses and infirmities, yet I will be satisfied and contented with that. God, under the covenant of grace, will for Christ’s sake accept of less than he requires in the covenant of works. He requires perfection of degrees, but he will accept of perfection of parts; he requires us to live without sin, but he will accept of our sincere endeavors to do it. Though a believer, in his own person, cannot perform all that God commands, yet Jesus Christ, as his surety and in his stead, hath fulfilled the law for him. So that Christ’s perfect righteousness is a complete cover for a believer’s imperfect righteousness. Hence the believer flies from the covenant of works to the covenant of grace; from his own unrighteousness to the righteousness of Christ. If we consider the law in a high and rigid notion, so no believer can fulfil it; but if we consider the law in a soft and mild notion, so every believer does fulfil it: Acts xiii. 22, “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfil all my will” ; Ταῦτα τὰ θελοματα, “All my wills”, to note the universality and sincerity of his obedience. David had many slips and falls, he often transgressed the royal law ; but being sincere in the main bent and frame of his heart, and in the course of his life, God looked upon his sincere obedience as perfect obedience. A sincere Christian’s obedience is an entire obedience to all the commands of God, though not in respect of practice, which is impossible, but in disposition and affection. A sincere obedience is a universal obedience. It is universal in respect of the subject, the whole man; it is universal in respect of the object, the whole law ; and it is universal in respect of durance, the whole life ; he who obeys sincerely obeys universally. There is no man that serves God truly that doth not endeavor to serve God fully: sincerity turns upon the hinges of universality; he who obeys sincerely endeavours to obey thoroughly, Num. xiv. 24. A sincere Christian does not only love the law, and like the law, and approve of the law, and delight in the law, and consent to the law, that it is holy, just, and good, but he obeys it in part, Horn. vii. 12, 16, 22 ; which, though it be but in part, yet he being sincere therein, pressing towards the mark, and desiring and endeavoring to arrive at what is perfect, Phil. iii. 13, 14, God accepts of such a soul, and is as well pleased with such a soul, as if he had perfectly fulfilled the law. Where the heart is sincerely resolved to obey, there it does obey. A heart to obey, is our obeying; a heart to do, is our doing; a heart to believe, is our believing; a heart to repent, is our repenting; a heart to wait, is our waiting; a heart to suffer, is our suffering; a heart to pray, is our praying; a heart to hear, is our hearing; a heart to give, feed, clothe, visit, is our giving, feeding, clothing, visiting; a heart to walk circumspectly, is our walking

circumspectly; a heart to work righteousness, is our working righteousness; a heart to shew mercy, is our shewing mercy; a heart to sympathize with others, is our sympathizing with others. He that sincerely desires and resolves to keep the commandments of God, he does keep the commandments of God, and he that truly desires and resolves to walk in the statutes of God, he does walk in the statutes of God. In God's account and God's acceptance, every believer, every sincere Christian, is as wise, holy, humble, heavenly, spiritual, watchful, faithful, fruitful, useful, thankful, joyful, &c., as he desires to be, as he resolves to be, and as he endeavours to be; and this is the glory of the new covenant, and the happiness that we gain by dear Jesus." Taken from the 5th Volume of Thomas Brooks Works, P. 327-329