

“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 53 – “Christian Perfection and John Wesley” (Part 4), Prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on October 4th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

1st John 1: 8 - 2: 1 – “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.” “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.” “And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

In a sermon on Christian Perfection, where he was preaching on Philippians 3: 12, “Not that I have already attained or become perfect” John Wesley says:

“Thus doth Jesus “save his people from their sins: “And not only from outward sins, but also from the sins of their hearts; from evil thoughts, and from evil tempers. “True,” say some, “we shall thus be saved from our sins; but not till death, not in this world.” But how are we to reconcile this with the express words of St. John? “Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world.” The Apostle here, beyond all contradiction, speaks of himself and other living Christians, of whom (as though he had foreseen this very evasion, and set himself to overturn it from the foundation, he flatly affirms, that not only at, or after death, but in this world, they are as their Master, 1 John iv 17. Exactly agreeable to this are his words in the first chapter of this Epistle, (verse 6, &c.) “God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.” “If we walk in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.” And again, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Now it is evident, the Apostle here also speaks of a deliverance wrought in this world. For he saith not, the blood of Christ will cleanse, (at the hour of death, or in the day of judgment) but it cleanseth (at the time present) us [living Christians] from all sin. And it is equally evident, that if any sin remain, we are not cleansed from all sin: if any unrighteousness remain in the soul, it is not cleansed from all unrighteousness. Neither let any sinner against his own soul say that this relates to justification only, or the cleansing us from the guilt of sin ; First, Because this is confounding together what the Apostle clearly distinguishes who mentions first, to forgive us our sins, and then to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Secondly, Because this is asserting justification by works in the strongest sense possible: it is making all inward, as well as outward holiness

necessarily previous to justification. For, if the cleansing here spoken of, is no other than the cleansing us from the guilt of sin, then we are not cleansed from guilt; i. e. are not justified, unless on condition of walking in the light, as he is in the light. It remains, then, that Christians are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness: that they are now, in such a sense, perfect, as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers.”

Scriptural proof for the reality of Indwelling remaining corruption in the believer’s heart –

The following Scriptures show us that Wesley’s view of Christian Perfection as “being able to be saved from all sin”, in the sense of its motions in the Christian’s heart, in this life, is not compatible with the Bible’s teaching that although we do not walk according to the flesh, we still have a remaining principle of corruption and indwelling sin which the apostle Paul terms “the

flesh”, which wars against the Spirit, and that we will have this law or principle with us as Christians until we die physically.

It is sin singular which is mentioned in verse 8, not sins plural. We will be deceiving ourselves if say that we have no sin and have reached a state of Christian perfection. Wesley does not sufficiently consider the reality of sin’s remaining power and presence in the heart of a true Christian and thinks, wrongly, that sin simply consists of voluntary transgressions against a known law. It is true that the dominion of sin has surely been broken over the Christian. (Romans 6: 14) But the weakened presence of sin is still there, and it wages war against the Holy Spirit’s good work there. The true Christian does not excuse any sin that he finds within himself; but he does mourn over it, and he will do all that he can, being led by the Holy Spirit, to mortify, to put to death his members which are on the earth; fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. These things the Christian will persevere in putting off, and will he will persevere in putting on the new man.” Ephesians 4: 20 – “But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

James 3: 1 and 2 - “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.” “For we all stumble in many things.” “If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.”

Psalms 19: 12-14 – “Who can understand his errors?” “Cleanse me from secret faults.” “Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me.” “Then I shall be blameless.” “And I shall be innocent of great transgression.” “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.”

1st Kings 8: 38-40 – “Whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers.

Psalms 18: 23 – “I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity.” (He does not say that he was sinless; he said that he kept himself from his iniquity. That is, he kept himself from what his fleshly nature might have wanted to do.

Conclusion – Wesley has misunderstood and misinterpreted a number of verses in regard to the sanctification of the believer.

a. Wesley believes that the word of God ought to be taken at face value, without any qualification, when it says that we are saved from all sin, cleansed from all sin, delivered from all sin, and other such phrases. In doing so, he mistakenly thinks that the end of the process of our sanctification, the perfection toward which we strive, is a state which we can fully attain to in this present life; a state which God can grant to us as a blessing.

But it is truly a mis-interpretation of the scriptures; not understanding correctly the nature of sin, or righteousness, or sanctification correctly. His teaching on this subject should not be received, because it leads to an unrealistic view of trying to attain to a kind of perfection that we are not promised in the word of God. The kind of perfection that the word of God teaches that we can attain to is maturity, a wise view of ourselves as sinners, even though we are redeemed people. We are people pressing on to know the Lord; learning His ways, walking in His truth, and pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. (1st Timothy 6: 11) All the while, we are covered by the imputed righteousness of Christ, and we are being changed and transformed by the powerful imparted grace of Christ. Our obedience is a sincere obedience.

John Owen says: “The saints weigh their own righteousness in the balance, and find it wanting.... In particular: they daily weigh all their particular actions in the balance, and find them wanting, as to any such completeness as, upon their own account, to be accepted with God. “Oh!” says a saint, “if I had nothing to commend me unto God but this prayer, this duty, this conquest of a temptation, wherein I myself see so many failings, so much imperfection, could I appear with any boldness before him? Shall I, then, piece up a garment of righteousness out of my best duties? Ah! it is all as a defiled cloth,” Isaiah 64:6. These thoughts accompany them in all their duties, in their best and most choice performances: — “Lord, what am I in my best estate? How little suitableness unto thy holiness is in my best duties! O spare me, in reference to the best thing that ever I did in my life!” Nehemiah 13:22. When a man who lives upon convictions has got some enlargements in duties, some conquest over a sin or temptation, he hugs himself, like Micah when he had got a Levite to be his priest: now surely it shall be well with him, now God will bless him: his heart is now at ease; he has peace in what he has done. But he who has communion with Christ, when he is highest in duties of sanctification and holiness, is clearest in the apprehension of his own unprofitableness, and rejects every thought that might arise in his heart of setting his peace in them, or upon them. He says to his soul, “Do these things seem something to thee? Alas! thou hast to do with an infinitely righteous God, who looks through and through all that vanity, which thou art but little acquainted withal; and should he deal with thee according to thy best works, thou must perish.” - Vol. 2 of his Works, P. 188, Of Communion with the Son Jesus Christ.

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 θελήματα, “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 duration, 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