

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 72

John Wesley – Part 2

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Absent Jesus Christ, the human race has never produced an individual whose life does not contain some sin, some darkness, some “bad,” and some “ugly.” Fortunately, through the grace and work of God, history has shown us many have lived lives with much good. John Wesley may have left earth over 200 years ago, but his life is one open to close scrutiny because of his international, public presence as well as his own prolific writing and journaling.

Our goal in this lesson is to examine noteworthy and good aspects of Wesley and his ministry. With nothing in the way of harsh judgment, we will also examine some aspects of John Wesley that one might consider “bad” or even “ugly.” As we do so, we will see how God worked through this remarkable man to bring much needed reform and attention to holy living to many that seemed to be bypassed by the organized church of their day.

We will not review the basics of the life of Wesley we studied last week. Instead, that lesson is available for review on the web at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. We will pick up the life of Wesley from his early adulthood and provide necessary additional background information in the various categories we consider.

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

Last week, we briefly covered the “conversion” (Wesley’s term) that Wesley experienced in 1738 after his return from America. Although Wesley had been an ordained Anglican minister, working as a clergyman in both England and America, Wesley landed in England and went right to work. He covered many miles, exhausting every opportunity to preach publicly and speak privately with people about God, faith, and holy living.

During this time, Wesley came into many conversations with a man named Peter Bohler. Bohler was a Moravian missionary who was in England awaiting a departure to America. Bohler and Wesley would talk theology at every opportunity. At one point, Bohler announced to Wesley that Wesley had no saving faith! Bohler believed that Wesley was attempting to justify himself through his pleasing works before God. While Bohler would quickly acknowledge that Wesley had an intellectual belief in God, Bohler believed that Wesley lacked the faith of the born again, which satisfies God and is the means of salvation to man.

After a month of these conversations, Wesley came to a point where he agreed with Bohler. The key to Bohler's argument that ultimately persuaded Wesley was that "true faith in Christ" had the fruit of "constant Peace from a sense of forgiveness." This peace Wesley lacked, making Bohler's argument that Wesley therefore lacked "true faith" and tapping into a sense of doubt and insecurity that had long plagued Wesley. Despite the outward appearance that Wesley lived a most exemplar life, Wesley was troubled internally. In his journal, Wesley would privately record that he was "a child of wrath" who was an "heir to Hell" as one "alienated" from the life of God. So on Sunday, March 5, 1738, Wesley recorded that he was indeed lacking saving faith.

Wesley was ready to stop all teaching and preaching until he could find the faith he was missing. Bohler advised against that course of action. In 21st century speak, Bohler believed that Wesley should "fake it till you make it."¹

Consistent with Bohler's advice, Wesley went to the prison and counseled a man set for execution. Through the conversation, the man accepted Christ and his born again faith gave him peace as he went to the gallows. Wesley continued his preaching through this time when he felt himself unsaved.

Several months later after much prayer and struggling, Charles (John Wesley's younger brother) found a moment of 'conversion' where he believed, "I found myself at peace with God, and rejoiced in the hope of loving Christ...I saw that by faith I stood; and the continual support of faith which kept me from falling."²

John's response was one of great despondency. For several days, John struggled through the idea that he had never had a singular occurrence of "feeling" God's forgiveness and peace. On May 24, John went to a Moravian meeting on Aldersgate Street where Luther's *Preface to Romans* was read. Wesley recorded the events as follows:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.³ (Emphasis in original).

¹ In 18th century speak, Wesley recorded it as "Preach faith *till* you have it; and then, *because* you have it, you *will* preach faith." *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, p.86 (Wesley Journal entry reference May 5, 1738) (Zondervan edition).

² Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley, a Biography* (Wm B. Erdmans 2003), p. 60.

³ Zondervan edition at 103.

THE GOOD:

What a wonderful experience and answer to prayer! While I am not so persuaded that Wesley was adrift under the wrath of God prior to the Aldersgate experience, there is no doubt that the events that night brought a level of emotional assurance to Wesley. Here was a man who desperately sought approval from God, knowing intellectually that his own merit would never secure that approval. God provided Wesley an opportunity to find emotional assurance to accompany his mental recognition of the validity of trusting in the righteousness of Christ.

Point for Home:

In Romans, Paul spends the first two and ½ chapters setting out the reasons that all, Jew and Gentile alike, are condemned before God when standing on their own merits. Yet, as Paul explains in Romans 3:21-22, “now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”

THE BAD AND THE UGLY:

Wesley spent a good deal of his life focusing on how he *felt* about his salvation. Even as we look at his write up of the Aldersgate “conversion,” we read how his heart “*felt strangely warmed*” and he “*felt*” he trusted in Christ.

Why do we label this as “bad” or “ugly?” Our emotions should never be the barometer of our standing before God. Emotions are subjective and fluctuate, more so for some than others. While emotions can be wonderful motivators, our salvation is not so subjective. The assurance we have in Christ is one that can uphold us when our hearts and feelings are less than confident! This is the import of 1 John 3:16-20:

This is how we **know** what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ... This then is how we **know** that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

The difference between what we *know* and what we *feel* can be huge. We are called to know the truth, to know Christ, and to know the Father. The Scripture never sets our feelings as our basis of assurance.

We can see much the same unfolding in Psalm 42 and 43.⁴ The psalmist does not *feel* God's presence. His soul "pants" and "thirsts" for God. He writes, "my tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"

The psalmist's response is to go through a mental and intellectual checklist of God. He begins with "These things I remember as I pour out my soul." The psalmist then recounts the work of God in his life concluding, "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

Perhaps the most instructive part of these two psalms is that even after that mental pep talk, the feelings are *still* not there for the psalmist. We read the psalmist twice more going through the mental exercise, confident that though he felt alienated from God, he knew better!

Point for home:

Let us have confidence when our hearts condemn us. If we have put our trust in Christ, he is faithful beyond our feelings!

SHARING THE GOSPEL

THE GOOD:

I am not sure that there is anyone since the apostle Paul who traveled so much and shared the gospel with so many as John Wesley. Preaching through his 87th birthday, Wesley used his whole life in an effort to preach and share the gospel. He spent that time in England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as his short stay in America. Wesley rode on horseback over 250,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 sermons! Some of those sermons were to crowds in excess of 20,000 people! (Especially incredible when you consider that there were no microphones!)

Until 1739, Wesley spent his time preaching in churches and halls. A friend of his, George Whitefield, took to preaching outdoors in fields. After a good bit of coaxing and some prayer, Wesley took the plunge and on a Monday, April 2,

⁴ In our English Bibles, these are two separate psalms. In the Hebrew, they were combined as one psalm. In fact, the psalm is an acrostic. The first letter of each word that begins each verse goes through the Hebrew alphabet. So, the first word in verse one begins with *aleph* (the Hebrew "A"). The second verse begins with *beth* (the Hebrew "B"). This is one way we know the two psalms were originally one. It takes both to get through the whole alphabet!

1739, Wesley delivered his first outdoor sermon in a brickyard. The effect was immediate. Wesley found he could speak to more people at once, soon preaching outdoors to over 5,000 people at once. For the rest of his life, Wesley would preach both indoors and outdoors.

Often times, especially in the early decades of his preaching, Wesley shared his heart to crowds in the midst of great persecution. People tried burning houses where he stayed. People tried accosting him with physical violence. People sought out the public authorities in an effort to stop Wesley's teaching. Yet without fail, Wesley never let any threat or even real violence stop him from his mission of proclaiming God's Word as he understood it.

One might fairly ask what why Wesley's message created such ire among people? After all, Wesley was always an ordained Anglican minister; he never left the Anglican Church. We do not have any interviews of the persecutors to give us our answers. But, we are able to consider what Wesley journaled as well as consider our basic understanding of human nature. We can surmise a number of likely reasons for persecution.

First, Wesley chose to preach and teach to mostly the lower classes the majority of his life. The outcast and downtrodden were a soft spot for Wesley. He would frequently gain inspiration from the Scripture where Christ read from Isaiah that, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

Second, another aspect that incited violence among people was Wesley's hard teaching on holiness. Wesley was strict in his own life on aspects of righteous living, and he was not much less stringent on his followers. Wesley spoke out against cursing and blasphemy, drunkenness and uncleanness (it was Wesley who first said "cleanliness is, indeed, next to Godliness"⁵!). Wesley preached against wrath and envy. Wesley was also very strongly anti-slavery, and both preached and wrote extensively on that issue. In 1774, Wesley published a lengthy discourse on the horrors and sin involved in slavery ranging from the procurement of slaves to their treatment. Even though slavery was legal, Wesley wrote plainly it was evil: "Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong still."⁶

⁵ Wesley sermon 88 *On Dress*, Zondervan vol. 7 at 16. It is apparent from the sermon that Wesley is quoting a known proverb, but we have no earlier instance of its use in these words.

⁶ Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, Zondervan vol.11 at 70.

A third reason why many got exercised against Wesley centered on what we today would call “charismatic” events that accompanied many of his sermons. There were outbreaks of uncontrollable laughter, visions, shaking, and convulsions often resolving upon a confession of faith and medical healings. Most of the time, Wesley credited these actions to the working of the Holy Spirit. He would also mandate that proper teaching was needed to accompany the outbreak of charismata or Wesley taught that the source could just as easily be Satan.

Point for home:

Evangelism is God’s work, yet we are his hands and feet. So, we see Paul explaining to the Corinthians that while men may preach God’s word (and Paul did so “in weakness and in fear, and with much trembling”), the power to transform lives is from God himself. Our faith does not “rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Corinthians 2:3-5). Thus, we preach, we teach, and we live our lives to God’s glory. It may be in fields before thousands, or it may be in the grocery line before one, but God is at work in his church to bring about the glory of Christ! It is amazing he chooses us as his co-workers!

THE BAD AND THE UGLY:

There were aspects of Wesley’s teaching and preaching that some might see as less than stellar. In his efforts to get his message out, Wesley not only preached, but he also wrote prolifically. Some of his writings, however, were not necessarily his own. It seems that Wesley would occasionally publish under his own name materials that actually belonged to someone else.

We should not be too harsh in judging Wesley on this matter. He was writing at a time much different than our own. Footnoting was less common, and scholarship had not produced the clarity of “ownership” of material as today.

There were a number of areas where Wesley was convinced that his theology and teaching was right as against those who held different views. On many of these issues, those who refuse to acknowledge Wesley’s position were targets of his teaching. Most well known in this regard was Wesley’s good friend, George Whitefield. Whitefield held a Calvinist view on predestination (see Lesson 59). Wesley was strongly Arminian (see Lesson 64). Wesley came out against Whitefield and spent time writing and preaching against Whitefield. Eventually, a number of concerned friends helped Whitefield reach out to Wesley and bring the two back to some measure of civility.

Perhaps the greatest area where Wesley's teaching raises the eyebrows of many evangelicals and reformed scholars is in the area of "perfectionism." Tomkins' analysis of Wesley's teaching leads him to conclude that Wesley, "passionately believed that the Bible promised the Christian life could be free from sin."⁷ Wesley taught accordingly, and though he never claimed to personally reach perfection, we have indications he found others he believed had done so.

This belief was uncommon in the reformed tradition of Calvin and others. The closest similarity lay in the Catholic doctrine of sainthood. In fact, Wesley had to continually fight against the allegations that he was actually a Catholic (although nothing could be further from the truth).

In interviewing those who claimed to have hit a stage of perfection, Wesley got this account:

About Christmas, 1758, I was deeply convinced there was a greater salvation than I had attained. The more I saw of this, and the more I prayed for it, the happier I was. And my desires and hopes were continually increasing for above a year.

I felt God was able to give it [perfection] then, and was unspeakably happy. In the evening as he was preaching [not Wesley himself, but another preacher], my heart was full, and more and more so, till I could contain no more. I wanted to be alone, that I might pour my soul out before God; and when I came home I could do nothing but praise and give thanks. From that moment I have felt nothing but love in my heart; no sin of any kind. And I trust that I shall never more offend God. I never find any cloud between God and me: I walk in the light continually.

This perfectionist belief rapidly becomes a doctrine taught in a number of churches about receiving a second blessing once one reaches this perfection. The second blessing becomes the lynch pin for the early holiness/charismatic movement in the western world.

Meanwhile, more reformed scholars are quick to point to a number of scriptures that seem to belie this teaching. First, it is noteworthy that Paul himself never achieved such a state. He considered himself the chief of sinners whose sole merit before God lay in the sacrifice of Christ. Paul wrote the Ephesian church and noted that they "were blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing

⁷ Tomkins at 156.

in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). The verb Paul uses is historical in its tense.⁸ So, Paul is telling the far-from-perfect Ephesians (see the rest of the letter lest you doubt their imperfection!) that they have already been blessed with every spiritual blessing. There is no coming second blessing of perfection. This is the same point John makes in 1 John 1: 8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Here, John is using a present tense verb to stress his and his readers’ status as sinners even as he wrote.

Some might also point to Wesley’s endorsement of certain women preachers as a let down from biblical admonitions that “women should remain silent in the churches” (1 Corinthians 14:34). Yet to Wesley, this injunction was not absolute, and where the situation pressed itself, and the gospel message would beneficially be proclaimed, Wesley believed certain women should teach and preach.

Points for Home:

Remember to strive for holiness. It is God’s will that we live in accordance with his direction. However, do not forget that in the death of Christ “a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last” (Romans 1:17). By that passage, Paul is telling us we begin the Christian walk with righteousness by faith (not works or perfection), and we end life still righteous by faith rather than by works or perfection. There is never a point in our life where we have perfection to count on rather than faith in Christ. In other words, we “will live by faith” (Romans 1:17).

CONCLUSION

There are many wonderful things we have left out of our review. From the good side, we have failed to mention how Wesley gave away most every thing he ever earned (and his earnings were quite substantial from book sales in his later years). He never considered money worth keeping. He gave it readily to the poor and to advance the gospel. By the same token, we have not gone into any depth about the marital difficulties he had and how his choices and actions might have led to his marital woes. There are a number of well-written biographies for those who would like to read more depth on this fascinating man.

Of course, Wesley’s greatest, long lasting legacy is the Methodist Church. His work at the root of that denomination, along with his interactions with other formative people, will be our subject next week.

⁸ Technically, it is called an “aorist” verb. It was used in Greek to specify an action that has already occurred in the past.