

Narrative on “Perfecting Grace”

Perhaps the only doctrine that was historically unique to Methodism was what John Wesley called **“being perfected in love.”** In the old days it was called “sanctification.” Now we, like Wesley, prefer the participle verb form—“perfecting grace.” You have heard very few sermons on—maybe none because we preachers have not wanted you to demand that we move! But we have a record of at least 68 times that John Wesley’s preached on this theme.

The year he was the same age that I will be this week—81, he decided to write out one more summary of his somewhat unique theme of Christian perfection, or holy living, or what today we prefer to call “perfecting grace.” Wesley, the old man, was staying in a rural community south of London called “Tunbridge Wells.” It was 1784. In 2000, with a former associate pastor, I went to Tunbridge Wells and thought deeply for a long time about Wesley’s being there in 216 years earlier. As a text that day, he chose I Peter 2:3 that is worded this way in *The Message*, a New Testament paraphrased by Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian:

“The old life is a grass life; its beauty is brief; it droops and dries up. GOD’S WORD GOES ON FOREVER; this is the Word that conceived a new life for you. So clean house! Make a clean sweep of malice and pretense, envy and hurtful talk. You’ve had a taste of God. Now, like babies at the breast, drink! Drink deeply of God’s pure kindness. Then you’ll grow up mature and whole in God.”

Let’s go back to our metaphor of “Salvation House.” In saving or justifying grace, we get through the threshold and into the house of God’s welcoming love, God’s amazing grace. We say with confidence, “I am a Christian.”

Follow me now in your imagination. Pretend that you move into this new residence of hospitality and warmth and love. You love the dinners, the table talk, the washer and dryer, the pool table, the bedroom, and the heating and air conditioning. As my grandson, Bradley, says, “Sweet.” But any house has more than the room into which we are welcomed. But God says, “Okay, now let’s go to some other rooms. And God opens the door to rooms where the stench hits you in the face, and some dark and scary rooms where spiders might hide. As each of these doors is opened, you are reminded in your life of what I Peter called the **“malice and pretense, the envy and jealousy, the hurtful talk.”** The NIV in the pew has these words that place a sour taste in your mouth and a bit of growing nausea: **“deceit, hypocrisy, slander,”** And you say, “No, God, you don’t understand. I just want to go to heaven when I die; I don’t want to be a saint!” But I Peter goes on and Mr. Wesley went on with a word to us nominal Christians: **“You have had a taste of God. Now, like you were as a baby at your mother’s breast, drink! Drink of God’s kindness to you.** Can you pass that on?

Wesley called it “growing in grace.” He even defined what he meant by being perfected in love. He said there are two dimensions of our spiritual life:

1. Love God and your neighbor more, not less. Compared to last year, do you love God and your neighbor more....or less? If less, why have you backslid? What are people noticing in you—more perfecting grace or more deceit, pretense, hurtful talk?

2. Secondly, Wesley points out that **we will always have to work on our weaknesses** like

- temper,
- tendency to hold old grudges
- disposition for pouting instead of venting
- the baggage we carry from our childhood
- our election year political prejudice,
- our generational bias,
- or reacting out of our pain and hurt.
- gender, racial, life orientation issues

These we must work on by God's grace, but are we giving God much leash?

- What addicting habits do you and I know we need to break?
- Are we nursing our bad attitude?
- Are we being abusive or flying off the handle?
- Are you going to the point of slander with your hurtful talk?
- Are you holding on to your grudges?
- Are you playing judge when you know that only God has the right to judge us and others?

Every Methodist preacher is asked this question before ordination: “Are you going on to perfection?” One young whipper snapper loudly answered, “NO!” And a wise bishop paused and asked, “Then, son, what are you going on to?” It is a sobering question. If we are not growing in grace, we are in great danger of being like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. He called them “whitewashed mausoleums. “

Let's sing about what God wants to do in our lives. Note these lyrics very carefully. Let's let go and let God have God's way with you.