Felt need

We continually chase after perfection and find it is always just beyond our grasp.

Key Idea

God’s version of perfection is not something to be achieved but to be received in a way that transforms.

Key Verse

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your strength.”

— Deuteronomy 6:5 (CEB)

Suggested Scripture for Worship

Deuteronomy 6:1-5, Romans 12:1-2

Supporting Readings

Chapter 2 of A Plain Account of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection Theologically Considered by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki pp.115-123.

Selected Sections I-V of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection by John Wesley pp. 11-60.

Section I para. 1-5, 10-11
Section II para. 13
Section III para. 17
Section IV para. 19
Section V para. 20
Sermon Helps:

INTRODUCTION

In baseball, a perfect game is defined as one where no one from a team reaches first base. The pitcher gives up no hits, issues no walks and his or her teammates don’t commit any errors. Perfect games are extremely rare. In fact, they are so rare that there have been over a quarter million official baseball games played, and only 23 of them have been perfect games. (List of Major League Baseball perfect games, Wikipedia)

That’s .0001! In baseball, perfection is rare!

It’s even more rare in life. We tend to define something as perfect when we can’t find any flaw to it. It is without fault or inaccuracy of any kind. By that definition, there has never been a truly perfect game thrown in baseball. At some point, a pitcher will likely throw a pitch that’s the umpire calls a ball. It’s an imperfect pitch; it didn’t meet the criteria for perfection.

John Wesley worked diligently over his lifetime to help people understand how he defined perfection, particularly Christian perfection. It seems for Wesley, perfection could be summarized in one word; Love. He said in his pamphlet, The Character of a Methodist, “A Methodist is one who loves the Lord God with all the heart, with all the soul, with all the mind, and with all the strength” (15).

Wesley appeals to a key verse in the life of the ancient Israelites to encapsulate what it means to live out Christian perfection. Deuteronomy 6:5 spoke to the wholeness of Israelite life; “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (NASB).

ILLUSTRATION

Many of us were assigned the book Charlotte’s Web by E.B. White when we were still in school. It taught us valuable lessons about friendship, and perhaps, gave us some insight into what it’s like to love someone else completely. It also contains one of the best farewell speeches ever written.

When Charlotte knows her life is coming to an end, she has one last conversation with Wilbur. She’s woven one web after another in an attempt to save Wilbur’s life, and while she’s been successful, the time has come for Charlotte herself to say goodbye. As Charlotte and Wilbur both realize that Charlotte’s life is ebbing away, they have one last conversation.

Wilbur asks “Why did you do all this for me? I don’t deserve it. I’ve never done anything for you.”

“You have been my friend” responds Charlotte. “That in itself is a tremendous thing.”
CONNECTION TO SCRIPTURE

Virtually the entire book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ farewell speech to Israel. Most of the book is written in the 2nd person and sounds like a sermon. The Law and God’s mighty acts of salvation are presented again and explained, so that they might be put before the people of God as foundational to who they are and what sets them apart from the nations around them.

Deuteronomy 6:1-5, which contains both the Shema of Israel in verse 4, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!” and what, for John Wesley was definitive of Christian Holiness in verse 5 “...love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Verse 4 begins with the imperative “Hear”; it’s more than a call to attention; it’s a summons to listen actively and respond. It’s a summons to consider seriously the meaning of the words in their original context. The words “The Lord is our God, the Lord is one,” should not be taken as an acknowledgment of monotheism or the unity of God. Rather, it’s a call to undivided allegiance to God. The Mosaic covenant and the first of the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods before me,” support this interpretation of v.4. The ongoing issue addressed in Deuteronomy was the danger of Israel worshipping other gods, the possibility of corrupting the faith Canaanite beliefs and practices. The fact was and is, that Israel’s God is a single one.

Verse 5 is in the imperative form of a command. In the context of the covenant and the law “love” is not simply a feeling but a total response of devotion and obedience. “Heart,” “soul,” and “might” stress that love is to entail all of one’s faculties. It should also be stressed that the love of God, through obedience to the law, expresses itself in love and concern for others, including slaves, the poor, foreigners, the widow and the orphan (Deut.10:18, 15:7-18, 16:11, 24:17-18). i

APPLICATION

Two points can be emphasized here:

1. Singleness of devotion to God- An undivided heart that is focused exclusively on God and rejects the popular narratives of our culture.
2. To love God- We love God in response to God’s love for us (1 John 4:19).

CONNECTION TO THE WESLEY READINGS

Christian perfection is:

- “....Christian perfection is loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength... It means that all thoughts, words and actions are governed by pure love” (41).
- “Perfection is nothing higher or lower than this; the pure love of God and human beings...It is love governing the heart and life, running through all our tempers, words and actions”(44).
Christian perfection is not:

- Christian perfection is not freedom from ignorance or mistakes.
- In response to the statement “In what sense Christians are not perfect,” Wesley responds, “They are not free from ignorance or from making mistakes” (18).
- Christian perfection is not absolute perfection; it doesn’t expect omniscience.
- Suchocki adds to this; “If we are subject to error, and if we are not free from ignorance or mistakes, then some of the things that we think must be erroneous….If we took this seriously, would it not change our attitudes and actions toward those who disagree with us?” (117).

Christian perfection in practice:

- “…when differences seem to be irreconcilable, one nonetheless offers friendship and fellowship to the other. This is Christian perfection in practice” (118).
- “Christian perfection does not protect one from temptation” (119).
- “Yielding to temptations could cause us all kinds of difficulties, but it could never cut off the continuously offered grace of God” (119).

Recognizing Christian Perfection:

- Although a person can experience setbacks in their pursuit of Christian perfection through ignorance, mistakes, giving in to temptation and all kinds of human frailties, that person can still seek to develop in perfection. While the development might be “hedged...in by outward circumstances,” a person can deal with those hedges through the spiritual disciplines (47). These spiritual disciplines are means of grace, through which we are opened to the grace of God increasingly.

[Ultimately]... “Christian perfection is not a doctrine to be studied and read. It is a Christian blessing to be embraced and lived. It is God’s gracious call to become what we were created to be; creatures of God, developing all the powers with which we were created toward the glory of God” (123).

¹Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B.