Key Idea

Prayer activates our creative response to God’s grace, compels us to love those we disagree with, orients our whole life toward God, teaches us to rely on God in all things, weaves us together as the body of Christ, and is made visible through our actions of serving God and neighbor.

Key Verse

“Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (CEB)

Readings for the Week to Prepare for the Small Group Discussion

Luke 18:1-8
Philippians 4:4-20
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Chapter 4 of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection Theologically Considered by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki pp.135-144.

Section VIII of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection by John Wesley pp. 81-90.

Overview

In this section of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection, we catch a glimpse of the prayer life of John Wesley and how it is a formational part of his experience of committing to a life of Christian perfection. Suchocki writes, “to learn from this great man is to let his experience enter our own” (135). Wesley teaches us what it means to “become fully dependent on God” (83).
Wesley’s prayer life models the scriptural instruction in *I Thessalonians* to “Pray without ceasing” and he does so with the persistence of the widow in the parable in *Luke 18*. His witness encourages us to do the same.

Gathering Prayer

We are grateful, most Holy One, that you are always calling to us, inviting us to respond to You through our thoughts, words, and actions. Open our hearts and minds to you in this time that we might be fully attentive to your grace and receptive to your love that seeks us even as we study and discuss these readings today. Fill us and challenge us to respond with a renewed Spirit that we might be a part of your new creation in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Discussion Questions

1. This week’s readings focus on prayer. How do you define and describe prayer? What questions do you have about prayer?

2. How has your prayer life grown and changed over your life as a Christian? What has gotten easier? What has gotten harder?

3. “Prayer and the life of constant prayer are defined in several ways” in this section of Wesley’s writing (100). List some of the “sparks” or functions of prayer that you read about. Which ones are the most familiar and comfortable to you? Which are the least familiar and comfortable to you? Which sparks help you think about prayer in new and/or challenging ways? How might you incorporate this into your prayer life?

4. Suchocki writes, “Prayer opens us to God’s calling, and insofar as we respond to those calls, channels are opened through which God’s creative grace pours. When we pray, the creative grace of God pours through us to do what God can do now that we are open to the work of God.” How does prayer help us to grow in Christian perfection (perfect love)? How can it help us to see new creative possibilities?
5. Wesley writes, “Although all the graces of God depend on God’s abundance, God is generally pleased to attach them to the prayers, the teaching, and the holiness of those whom God gives to be our examples in faith. By strong though invisible attractions, God draws some souls through their relationships with others” (81). Who has God placed in your life who has been an example of faith and helped you to draw close to God in Christian perfection (perfect love)? Who is God urging you to be an example of faith to? What do you need to do to help them draw close to God?

6. Many in our culture today experience discouragement, anxiety, and struggle with the question of suffering in the world and in their lives. As you reflect on your own struggles and those of others in these areas, how do you respond to Wesley’s words:

“True surrender is a complete conformity to the whole will of God, who wills and does all (except sin) that comes to pass in the world. In order to do this, we have only to embrace all events, good and bad, as God’s will.

….We are to bear with those we cannot change and be content with offering them to God. This is true surrender. Because Christ has borne our infirmities, we may well bear those of one another for Christ’s sake” (82).

7. Wesley writes about the relationship of perfect love and good works, stating that “The love of God is the beginning and the end of all our good works” (86). How is prayer a part of this relationship of love and good works? How does prayer energize us for good works and keep us from pride and works righteousness?

8. On page 86, Wesley shares a summary of his suppositions on Christian perfection. Take some time in your group to review these 11 points. As you reflect on them, which one best helps you clarify what Christian perfection is? Which one speaks to you at this point in your faith journey?

9. Suchocki writes “Our prayers, offered in the name of Christ, unite us as one body….Prayer is not just private but must also be corporate, and corporate prayers foster spiritual growth for both the individuals and the society as a whole, and therefore for the society’s influence and work in the world. Spiritual growth, of course, is always connectional; it relates to us more deeply toward one another in love and binds us in loving actions toward those beyond our own circles” (142).

10. In a time when our nation and our church are highly divided, how can corporate prayer be a means of grace
that binds us together in perfect love?

11. What are the petitions we might lift up in corporate prayer that will help us see new creative solutions to live together as the unified body of Christ?

Close with an affirmation of faith and prayer using these words from John Wesley:

“Together we are [your] family, fellow laborers in the vineyard of our God, your companions in the Kingdom and patience of Jesus. Although this we confess (if we are fools for Christ, yet as fools bear with us), we do expect to love God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves. Indeed we do believe that God will in this world so, “cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we shall perfectly love God, and worthily magnify God’s holy name” (89).