

“What it Means to be Reformed”; Session # 51 – “Christian Perfection and John Wesley” (Part 1), prepared for the Adult Sunday School Class on September 6th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

Read Psalm 18, verses 20-26 – “The LORD rewarded me according to my righteousness; According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, And have not wickedly departed from my God. For all His judgments were before me, And I did not put away His statutes from me. I was also blameless before Him, And I kept myself from my iniquity. Therefore the LORD has recompensed me according to my righteousness, According to the cleanness of my hands in His sight. With the merciful You will show Yourself merciful; With a blameless man You will show Yourself blameless; With the pure You will show Yourself pure; and with the devious You will show Yourself shrewd.”

For I have kept the ways of the Lord,.... John Gill says: “Not those which the Lord himself walks in, his ways of providence, or of grace; though these are and should be taken notice of and observed by good men, as the word used will bear to be rendered; but the ways which he has prescribed and directed men to walk in, the ways of his commandments, in which they should go; these were, in some measure, kept by David, who often, in the hundred nineteenth psalm speaks of his keeping the testimonies and statutes, and commandments of the Lord; as they are by good men, with some degree of pleasure, they take delight to walk in them; and with some degree of constancy, they keep walking in them, without turning to the right hand or the left, though solicited to it; but yet not perfectly, for they have many a slip and fall in them; wherefore this cannot be a reason of their being rewarded according to their righteousness: in strict justice, the words better agree with Christ, who kept the law of God perfectly, did his will completely; he came from heaven to do it; it was his meat and drink to accomplish it; and he always did the things which pleased his father, wherefore he rewarded him.”

The Reformed and Calvinistic doctrine of Christian Perfection is “keeping the ways of the Lord”: The believer perseveres in evangelical obedience based upon acceptance with God through the substitutionary finished work of Jesus Christ; that is, Christ’s righteousness being imputed to the believer; both for justification, and to cover him as he is pursuing righteousness and holiness in sanctification. Christ by His Spirit imparts grace to him which works in his heart to help him on to greater obedience and maturity in keeping the commandments of God.

John Wesley’s view is: The believer goes on to attain to Christian perfection by his own striving for personal holiness by the power of the Spirit of God. This goal, he believes, is set before the Christian in the Bible as an attainable goal that he can most definitely receive the grace for, and can possibly achieve. He believes that God has made great statements about holiness in the Bible, given us great promises in relation to holiness, and has commanded the believer to go on to perfection in holiness. The Christian can attain to it by praying for it, working at it, and receiving the grace from God to attain to that complete sanctification in this life. He also can fall from it once it has been attained, but he does not necessarily have to.

What is wrong with John Wesley’s view of Christian Perfection?

1st – Wesley’s definition of perfection, according to the Scriptures, is questionable. (The following quotes were taken from John Wesley’s sermon “On Perfection”, Sermon # 81 in the 2nd Volume of his Sermons on Several Occasions, P. 167-177)

On page 169 he says that Christian perfection is – “...the complying with that kind command; “My son give me thy heart”. “It is the loving the Lord his God with all his heart, and will all his soul, and with all his mind.” “This is the sum of Christian perfection: it is all comprised in that one word, love. The first branch of it is the love of God: and as he that loves God loves his brother also, it is inseparably connected with the second; “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”: Thou shalt love every man as thy own soul, as Christ loved us.” “On these two commands hang all the law and the prophets”: These contain the whole of Christian perfection.”

He goes on to say a little later:

“St. Peter expresses it in a still different manner, though to the same effect.” “As He that hath called you is holy, so you be holy in all of your behavior.” (1st Peter 1: 15) “According to this apostle then, perfection is another name for universal holiness: inward and outward righteousness: holiness of life arising from holiness of heart.”

He says: “If any expressions can be stronger than these, they are those of St. Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verse 23 – “The God of Peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may the whole of you, the spirit, the soul, and the body, (this is the literal translation) be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Some points of observation on these statements: Yes, it is true that all Christians are under the law of love, but which one of us keeps the first and greatest commandment perfectly and consistently at every point? He is saying that it is possible to come to the place where you do this. I do not think that the Scriptures warrant us to believe in our own evaluation of ourselves as having attained to the kind of perfection that he is talking about. The standard of the law is not subjective but objective. And only God can tell whether we are keeping His commandments perfectly, not we ourselves. Perfection in keeping all of God’s moral commandments mentioned in the Bible is indeed the goal which God intends that each and every believer strive toward; and some persons will have greater success than others, but none shall attain the perfection which the law of God requires; especially in the area of loving God with all of our heart. We may, and ought to give Him all of our heart, not only once, but every day. But we do this to show Him our sincerity in going about to keep His commandments by His grace and enablement. In the process of doing this, we will also confess our sins where we see that we are falling short. And then we will pray that we will be able to bringing forth the fruit of righteousness unto Him, as He enables us, to His glory. That is progressive sanctification.