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Christian perfection was at the foundations of what John Wesley believed. But he had a hard time explaining it.

He had a hard time articulating what he meant by Christian perfection. Many heard what he was talking about and thought he was teaching that it was our deeds that would save us rather than our faith. This ended up being one of the bigger scandals of his ministry. So, when he was interviewed in the 1740s by Bishop Gibson, the bishop encouraged him to write down his thoughts in their entirety.

John Wesley went on to write a 10,000-word sermon on the topic of Christian perfection. And just to give you an idea, my sermons might top out at 3,000 words.

In that sermon, he quoted a poem that his brother Charles wrote — a poem on the topic of perfection. John the preacher took 10,000 words in a sermon to explain Christian perfection. Charles the poet did it in 80. Let me read you that poem.

*God of all power and truth and grace,
which shall from age to age endure,
whose word, when heaven and earth shall pass,
remains and stands forever sure.*

*Calmly to thee my soul looks up
and waits thy promise to prove,
the object of my steadfast hope,
the seal of thine eternal love.*

*That I thy mercy may proclaim,
that all mankind thy truth may see,
hallow thy great and glorious name,
and perfect holiness in me.*

Charles ties in the idea of holiness as a necessity for Christian perfection.

We have been talking about holiness now for a couple of weeks. We started with our personal holiness — those things we do for ourselves that build up our faith, that teach us of God's great love for us. And then just last week we talked about the idea of social holiness, that way that God's love pours out from us into the lives of others.

The Wesleys were pushing the idea that holiness has a goal. We were not just doing holiness for the sake of doing holiness — we were engaging in holiness practices so that we might achieve what they called Christian perfection.

Let me back up a little, though. Because when we hear the word "perfection," we are going to hear it through our 21st-century understanding of that word, and that is not how John and Charles used it. They weren't even using an 18th-century definition of perfection. When they talked about perfection, they were using that word biblically.

The word they would have been most familiar with was the Greek word *teleos*. And in our Bible, that word is almost always translated as "perfection." But the word itself, *teleos*, has a deeper meaning to it. It invites us to think of words like complete, mature, whole — or even ripe.

So when I use the word perfection, or when we read about Christian perfection being one of the cornerstones of Methodism, perhaps one way we are invited to think about that is through the image of a grape — tended and cared for long enough that it might become ripe, complete, perfect.

Or maybe we think about the graduates we just celebrated — people who have put in the hard work to grow and to learn and to develop, and who are now *teleos*, ready to go live what they have learned.

In our tradition, it is *teleos* that we are seeking. It is *teleos* in love that we are being encouraged to find. That we would have been so nurtured in love, so nourished by love, so practiced in love, that we would begin to love as God has loved us.

I am not entirely certain of this, but I believe that the one book of the Bible John Wesley quoted more than any other is the letter of 1 John. I do know for a fact that he pointed to 1 John 4:19 as the central sum of the gospel:

We love because God first loved us.

If you are looking for a thesis statement for the entirety of Scripture — if you are looking for one book in the Bible that sums up what all the scriptures are about — you cannot do better than 1 John.

It is in 1 John that we learn that the ultimate nature of God is love. And we learn in 1 John that the ultimate call of our lives is to love as God has loved us. Our love is supposed to mirror the love God has for us.

Now, we know that doesn't always work. We know people — maybe even ourselves sometimes — who don't perfectly reflect the love of God. Have you ever looked at your reflection in one of those funhouse mirrors and seen how distorted a reflection can look? Sometimes that is what happens to our love. It gets so distorted that we no longer recognize it as the love of God anymore.

But when we think about being perfected — *teleos*, completed, ripened in love — we are not thinking about creating something new. Rather, we are thinking about getting reconnected to the idea that we were created as an act of God's love. God's love continues to redeem us, and it is God's love that sustains us every single moment of our lives. We are reconnecting, rather than creating some new way to love. We are relearning what it means that God loved us first.

Several years back I was in a small group of other people going into ministry. We were gathered around some of the central ideas that John Wesley formed his small groups around. And one of the questions we were asked every time we gathered was this:

Who is your enemy?

It is a hard question. Sometimes because there seem to be too many. But sometimes it is a hard question because we don't always think in those terms anymore. We like to think sometimes that we don't have that many enemies, that nobody in our lives treats us that badly.

But spending time every single week being asked who is your enemy gets you thinking. When you know you're going to have to answer that question, it gets you thinking: who will I name here?

Wesley began that practice in his small groups to teach us exactly where we needed to put the emphasis in our love. Because if we couldn't name who our enemies were, how could we possibly learn to love them as God does?

Our Gospel reading today ends with that instruction: we are to be perfect as God is perfect. And again, Matthew is using the word *teleos* for perfection there. So we can hear that as: be whole as God is whole. Be complete as God is complete. Be ripened in love as God is ripened in love.

Maybe striving for wholeness or completion sounds more manageable — or at least more human — than striving for perfection.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gets at the reason this kind of love is hard. It is not about loving when it is easy. Jesus talks about loving when it is hard. Love your enemies, he says. Love the ones who persecute you.

Jesus talks about a kind of love that demands everything from us. We can't just dip our toes in this kind of love and be satisfied. This is a kind of love that is going to demand your ego, your self-desire, all your thoughts on what is right and wrong. You have to lay all of it aside for the sake of love. I think that is what Jesus means when he tells us that we have to love our enemies. It is a demanding kind of love.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a beautiful book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he talks about the fallacy of cheap grace — grace that demands absolutely little of us. It demands something, perhaps. It demands that we show up to church, that we pray at the right time, or take communion the right way. But it doesn't actually require us to change our lives at all. He talks about cheap grace demanding so little of us that it is worthless in the end.

Instead, Bonhoeffer points us to what he calls costly grace — grace that demands that our lives and our hearts be changed in response to God's love for us. Receiving the grace and love of God should demand that our lives respond accordingly. And Bonhoeffer describes the reason grace is

costly: it is costly because it was costly for God. God loved a people so much that Jesus came into the world to die at our hands. Talk about loving your enemies.

In our Methodist tradition, we don't talk about cheap grace or costly grace. We talk about free grace. It is not cheap, and it is not costly. It is simply that God's love for us is such a wondrous gift that you cannot put a price on it. It cannot be valued or earned. It is simply given away by the love of God.

In a way, free grace seems even more powerful than costly grace. If it were merely costly, a price could still be named. But this is something of such worth that calling it costly doesn't even do it justice. It is something literally beyond our ability to value.

Free grace hangs on the idea that we only know of God's love and grace because God had such tremendous love as to leave heaven, live among us, knowing that we would torture and kill our own God.

Perfect love, like grace, must be free if it is to perfectly reflect the love God has for us. It cannot be earned. It cannot be bartered with. It cannot be reserved for people of the right class or status or privilege or race. It cannot be portioned out a little bit here to somebody I might like and a little bit there to someone else. Fully ripened, complete love cannot hold back. As Jesus might remind us in the Sermon on the Mount, it has to be poured out — especially for those we might name as the enemy.

So I'd like to conclude this series with a four-part framework that ties what we've been talking about into everything we've explored all year as we've been tracing our Wesleyan heritage.

The first part of this framework is that God is love, and God has loved us first. A few months ago we talked about prevenient grace — the idea that God loved us before we could even respond.

The second part is that we are then called to love one another. We might call this justification. That moment when we begin to love one another in return.

But justification asks us to move one step further, toward what we call sanctification — not just when we love one another, but when we begin to love as God has loved us. Loving even our enemies. That is the third movement in our framework of love.

And then, finally, the fourth part: after we have learned that God is love and God loved us first, after we have learned to love one another, after we have learned to love our enemies — we begin to be perfected in love. To be whole in love. To be complete. Or, to say it another way, to be completely satisfied in the act of loving as God has loved us. To be teleos in love.

What a gift we have for the world. In a world that has become so stingy with love — so ready to love only those who look the right way or say the right words — what a gift we have to offer: teleos, perfection in love.

Maybe we are not there yet. But as long as we can say that we are the people who are journeying there, that we are striving for that kind of perfection, I think we have a gift to offer the world in love.

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Let us pray.

Holy God, you have loved us in the best moments of our lives. But the miracle is that you have loved us in the worst moments, too. It is simply part of your nature to love us in wholeness.

Holy God, might we learn today to reflect that love a little better — to reflect it in the way we live and work with one another, to perfect it in the way we care for one another, to perfect it as we learn to love because you loved us first.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen.