

Love, Holiness and Happiness:

The Wesleyan Prescription for Effective Mission

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Introduction

It is fairly common in Christian literature, sermons and discipleship materials to come across the exhortation to ‘take up your cross,’ to embrace self-denial and discipline, with an expectation that the process of becoming holy will require a large measure of pain and suffering. Holiness, at a popular level, is often seen (and understood) in negative terms—the long list of things ‘we don’t do’, and the list of things we are urged to do seems rather restricted and unpleasant. There is a scene in the film *Chariots of Fire*, where ‘Eric Liddell’ rebukes a child for kicking a football on the Sabbath because his behaviour was displeasing to God and an affront to his holiness. This is a familiar viewpoint for many of us growing up in conservative evangelical churches several decades ago; the picture of a God who is holy, stern and only too ready to put an end to any sign of frivolity or pleasure. Many people today see Christianity as essentially negative and restrictive because it is associated with a long list of rules and regulations, duties and obligations. Christians are often seen as people who are miserable and unhappy, while desiring everyone else to be just like them! In a letter to Mrs Mary Pendarves (in 1731) John Wesley asked for her response to the charge that he was “being too strict, with carrying things too far in religion, and laying burdens on myself, if not on others, which were neither necessary nor possible to be borne.”¹ Wesley doubted he was guilty of this but wanted her response to his understanding that:

My present sense is this. I was made to be happy; to be happy I must love God; in proportion to my love of whom my happiness must increase. To love God I must be like him, holy as he is holy; which implies both the being pure from vicious and foolish passions and the being confirmed in those virtues and rational affections which God comprises in the word charity.²

For Wesley, a Christian could not be too happy or therefore too holy, and this life would be essentially attractive to those not yet Christians. He said that the truth of Christianity “lies in one single point: it is neither more nor less than love—it is love which ‘is the fulfilling of the law’, ‘the end of the commandment’. Religion is the love of God and our neighbour—that is every man under heaven. This love, ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words,

¹ John Wesley, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), Vol. 25: *Letters I, 1729-39*, Frank Baker, ed., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 293 (hereafter cited as *Works*).

² *Works* 25: 293-4.

and actions, is 'pure religion and undefiled'.³ Experiencing and living in the power of such love cannot be 'misery':

Is it misery to love God? To give him my heart who alone is worthy of it? Nay, it is the truest happiness, indeed the only true happiness which is to be found under the sun. So does all experience prove the justness of that reflection which was made long ago: 'Thou has made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest until it resteth in thee.' Or does anyone imagine the love of our neighbour is misery, even the loving man as our own soul? So far from it that next to the love of God this affords the greatest happiness of which we are capable.⁴

Surely such a life would be attractive to others and it should be the strongest witness we can offer to the nature of God and his mission to redeem the creation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Foundation: God is Love

From the very beginning of his ministry, Wesley believed that God's essential nature is love and that all other aspects of his nature and character must flow from, and be in harmony with, this core affirmation. He demonstrated in a lifetime of correspondence, preaching and teaching that this picture is biblical and can be found in the writings of the Church and modelled in the lives of its saints. It is this understanding that provides the framework for his theology and ministry because "no Scripture can mean that God is not love."⁵ Love is a relational quality and God is a Triune Being who is in relationship with the other persons of the Godhead in an eternal communion. He was to write:

... we know there is nothing deeper, there is nothing better in heaven or earth than love! There cannot be, unless there were something higher than the God of love! ... Here is the height, here is the depth, of Christian experience! 'God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.'⁶

A central theme in his writings had to do with the scriptural assertion that human beings are created in the image of God and it is the relationship of holy love that defines the essence of their personhood rather than some ontological substance.⁷

For to this end was man created, to love God; and to this end alone, even to love the Lord his God with all his heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. But love is the very image of God: it is the brightness of his glory. By love man is not only made like God, but in some sense one with him... Love is perfect freedom ... Love is the health of the soul, the full exertion of all its powers, the perfection of all its faculties.⁸

While God is not only the principal but the only object of our love in an absolute sense, this does not exclude the love of neighbour: "we cannot suppose any love forbidden by God which necessarily flows

³ *Works* 3, "The Important Question," 189. See also *Works* 2, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," 600.

⁴ *Works* 3, "The Important Question," 189. See also *Works* 3, "Spiritual Worship," 102; *Works* 4, "The Love of God," 343.

⁵ *Works* 3, "Free Grace," 556.

⁶ John Telford, ed., *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1931), 6:136 (hereafter *Letters* (Telford)).

⁷ See *Works* 4, "On Guardian Angels," 225-35; *Works* 4: "In Earth as in Heaven," 348-50.

⁸ *Works* 3, "Free Grace," 355-56. See also *Works* 4, "The Image of God," 293-95.

from this love of him.”⁹ In fact, to focus on the love of God to the exclusion of active love to neighbour actually weakened spiritual life.¹⁰ This means that “whatever love tends to the love of God is no more forbidden than that which flows from it.”¹¹ It is made even clearer in “The Circumcision of the Heart” as he explicitly links the love of God with the love of neighbour and God’s good creation:

it implies that we ‘love our brother also’. Not yet does it forbid us...to take pleasure in anything but God. To suppose this is to suppose the fountain of holiness is directly the author of sin, since he has inseparably annexed pleasure to the use of those creatures which are necessary to sustain the life he has given us. ... The one perfect good shall be your ultimate end. One thing shall ye desire for its own sake—the fruition of him that is all in all. One happiness shall ye propose to your souls, even a union with him that made them, the having ‘fellowship with the Father and the Son’, the being ‘joined to the Lord in one Spirit’. One design ye are to pursue to the end of time—the enjoyment of God in time and eternity. Desire other things so far as they tend to this. Love the creature—as it leads to the Creator. But in every step you take be this the glorious point that terminates your view. Let every affection, and thought, and word, and work be subordinate to this. Whatever ye desire or fear, whatever ye seek or shun, whatever ye think, speak, or do, be it in order to your happiness in God, the sole end as well as source of your being.¹²

It is important to note that righteousness is not defined by Wesley in legal terms as obedience to law or conformity to an absolute standard, but as God’s love expressed in a right relationship with himself and subsequently with all other persons.¹³ People were created in receipt of the fullness of God’s love and with the ability to fully return that love to God and to other creatures.¹⁴ Through God’s provision of full salvation in Christ, people can be both holy and happy through knowing, loving and enjoying God. Holiness is active love to God and neighbour based on God’s prior love poured into the heart; happiness is the enjoyment and security in such a love.¹⁵ It is the presence of these two qualities in a person’s life that is “the strongest evidence” of the truth of Christianity.¹⁶ His writings regularly emphasised that “according to the degree of our love is the degree of our happiness.”¹⁷

Love and Salvation

It is the love of God personally experienced that provides the basis for our acceptance of the salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ alone: “we are saved from our sins only by a confidence in the love of

⁹ *Works* 4, “The Love of God,” 334.

¹⁰ *Letters* (Telford), 6:115.

¹¹ *Works* 4, “The Love of God,” 335.

¹² *Works* 1, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” 408. See Outler n.78 on participation and enjoyment of God. Note also Susannah’s advice to John on the nature of sin in an earlier letter. See also *Letters* (Telford), 5:268; *Works* 4, “The Love of God,” 335. In n. 20 Outler points out that this is one of the oldest and constant themes in the Christian tradition from Origen through Augustine, Bonaventure and the Cambridge Platonists.

¹³ *Works* 1, “Upon our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, IX,” 642. See also *Works* 2, “The New Birth,” 188.

¹⁴ *Works*, 2:194. See also See also *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley*. 14 vols., 3rd edn. Thomas Jackson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 9:292-93 (hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson)).

¹⁵ See note 18, *Works* 1, “Justification by Faith,” 185. See also *Works* 2, “The New Birth,” 195; 11:125-28, 270; *Works* (Jackson), 10:75; 11:11; 14:212; *Letters* (Telford), 3:388.

¹⁶ *Works* (Jackson), 10:75-76.

¹⁷ *Works* 3, “An Israelite Indeed,” 283.

God. As soon as we 'behold what manner of love it is which the Father hath bestowed upon us', 'we love him ... because he first loved us'.¹⁸ Without this personal experience of divine love, there could be no basis for re-establishing a relationship with God on our part. Faith was "the grand means of restoring that holy love wherein man was originally created. It follows, that although faith is of no value in itself ... yet as it leads to that end—the establishing anew the law of love in our hearts—and as in the present state of things it is the only means under heaven for effecting it, it is on that account an unspeakable blessing to man, and of unspeakable value before God."¹⁹ Thus faith arose as a grace-enabled response to love experienced.²⁰ Wesley did not regard faith as an intellectual assent to a set of propositional facts, but "the revelation of Christ in our hearts: a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost...."²¹ It is faith that purifies the heart by God's power and "fills it with love stronger than death both to God and to all mankind—love that doth the works of God, glorying to spend and to be spent for all men, and that endureth with joy, not only the reproach of Christ, the being mocked, despised, and hated of all men, but whatsoever the wisdom of God permits the malice of men or devils to inflict; whosoever has this faith, this 'working by love', is not almost only, but altogether a Christian."²² However, faith is not an end in itself:

... [it] is only the handmaid of love ... it is not the end of the commandment. God hath given this honour to love alone. Love is the end of all the commandments of God. Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things. And it will endure when heaven and earth flee away; for 'love' alone 'never faileth'. Faith will totally fail; it will be swallowed up in sight, in the everlasting vision of God.²³

If love and trust are central, then Christianity is essentially about the heart and not the mind, it is about passion and not performance, about purity of intention in a relationship and not intellectual comprehension of propositional truth as an academic exercise. For Wesley, the true definition of religion was "not this or that opinion, or system of opinions, be they ever so true, ever so scriptural. ... [It is] walking in the love of God and man."²⁴

... the kingdom of God is not opinions (how right soever they be), but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. ... Shall we for opinions destroy the work of God, or

¹⁸ *Works* 11: 67-68. See also *Works* 11: 132-33; *Works* 1, "The Witness of the Spirit, II," 290.

¹⁹ *Works* 2, "The Law Established through Faith, II," 41.

²⁰ *Works* 11: 67-68.

²¹ *Works* 1, "The Circumcision of the Heart," 405. The quoted section was added in 1748 to reflect his changed understanding of 'faith' by 1738. See also *Works* 1, "The Almost Christian," 138-39.

²² *Works* 1, "The Almost Christian," 139. See also *Works* 1, "The Witness of our own Spirit," 304.

²³ *Works* 2, "The Law Established through Faith, II," 38. See also the comments on 1 Cor. 13:13 in John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*. London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, n.d.

²⁴ *Works* 4, "Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith," 57. See also *Works* 2, "The Mystery of Iniquity," 462-63, 70; *Works* 3, "Of Evil Angels," 22; "Spiritual Worship," 99; "On Dissipation," 117; "The Reward of Righteousness," 405; *Works* 4, "The Unity of the Divine Being," 66-67; 23:38, 125.

give up love, the very badge of our profession? Nay, by this shall men know that we belong to the Lover of Souls, to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.²⁵

The evidence we are not self-deceived comes from keeping all his commandments: “Love rejoices to obey, to do in every point whatever is acceptable to the Beloved. A true lover of God hastens to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven.”²⁶ He goes on to say: “Thou dost not keep his commandments; therefore thou lovest him not, neither art thou partaker of the Holy Ghost.”²⁷ Wesley strongly affirmed that 1 Cor. 13 shows “the highest of all Christian graces is properly and directly the love of our neighbour.” And this is affirmed in the whole Bible “that works springing from this love are the highest part of the religion therein revealed.”²⁸ That is why he encouraged his Methodists to wholeheartedly seek after:

a general revival of pure religion and undefiled, of the restoration of the image of God, pure love, in every child of man. Then let us endeavour to promote...this scriptural, primitive religion; let us with all diligence diffuse the religion of love among all we have any intercourse with; let us provoke all men...to love and to good works; always remembering these deep words (God engrave them on our hearts!), ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him.’ [1 Jn. 4:16]²⁹

Love and Mission

In a letter to James Barry in 1787, Wesley quotes a London preacher to the effect that if you try and take away a child’s rattle it will become angry and probably try to scratch or bite you. However, if you first offer the child something better, it will throw away the rattle itself.³⁰ As many parents will know, getting the baby to part with its plaything is easier said than done. It is often a mystery as to what motivates the child to reach out for the new item and let go of the old; what seems to work in one situation will not work in the next. Simply saying that something is ‘bad’ rarely works, nor does seeking to remove it by force—even if the thing is actually harmful or dangerous to the child’s welfare. As a loving parent we try to find the thing that will appeal to our child so that it prefers to have the new item rather than the one it already has. We need to find something that is appealing to the senses, is more desirable than the current item, and holds out the promise of greater pleasure. If this is a problem for a parent, it is even more of a problem for the person seeking to help another become a Christian. Wesley believed that in our current human condition nothing “is more natural to us than to seek happiness in the creature instead of the Creator.”³¹ If we are ‘happy’ with our current sources of pleasure and satisfaction, we are not going to be easily induced to give them up—even if it is harmful to our well-being. For example, seeking to change people’s addiction to drugs (legal or otherwise) by

²⁵ *Letters* (Telford), 5:339. See also *Works* 1, “Scriptural Christianity,” 175-76; “The Witness of our own Spirit,” 302-03; *Works* 3, “Of Former Times,” 448, 453; *Works* 3, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” 585, 592; *Works*, 22:316; *Works*, 26:564-65; *Works* (Jackson), 13:264-67; *Letters* (Telford), 7:333.

²⁶ *Works* 1, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” 280.

²⁷ *Works* 1, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” 281.

²⁸ *Works* 3, “The Reward of Righteousness,” 405.

²⁹ *Works* 3, “On Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel,” 592. See also *Works* 3, “On Pleasing All Men,” 422.

³⁰ *Letters* (Telford) VIII: 12.

³¹ *Works* 2, “Original Sin,” 179-80.

simply saying it is 'bad for you' or trying to change behaviour by the power of the law is rarely successful in the short term, let alone for the long term. Merely providing information and education is ineffective; authorities must try to find that which is more appealing and has a more desirable outcome, both personally and relationally. Car companies rarely bother providing us with reams of facts and figures as to why their car is better than the others—it is by creating a desire associated with the perceived benefits of ownership that entice us to change. Wesley believed that “No man loves God by nature.... What we love, we delight in: but no man has naturally any delight in him. We take no pleasure in him at all; he is utterly tasteless to us.”³²

What is it that will resonate with us and cause us to investigate whether life in God will be more satisfying than our present experience and will then keep us encouraged to develop the relationship to its full potential? If our present experience fails to deliver what it apparently promised, then we will seek for someone or something else to provide the missing satisfaction. If we are going to consider God as the answer to our present dissatisfaction, then we need to consider two key elements: our willingness to trust that God genuinely cares for us and our openness to the possibility that God will satisfy the heart. The Psalmist reminds us, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8, NIV). So what would induce us to try the ‘taste test’?³³ We are tempted to try some new taste if we are hungry, inquisitive, or intrigued by a new experience. Boredom and restlessness also make us open to new possibilities. It is at this point that we come to Wesley’s oft-quoted statement from Augustine: “Thou hast made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest until it resteth in thee.”³⁴ This human desire for ‘rest’ is a deep theological conviction for Wesley and it is the basis for his confidence in the appeal of the gospel. Ultimately, rest and happiness are one and the same in Wesley’s understanding, since when our hearts are truly at rest in God, we are truly happy. This keeps it centred on love and relationships, as this is the creational framework for human existence. Heb. 11:25 (NIV) makes reference to the enjoyment of “the fleeting pleasures of sin” and this reminds us that, like the child with the rattle, we are initially easily amused by anything that catches our attention; but the scripture (and Augustine) reminds us it does not ultimately last. Our Creator God has so made us that nothing outside of a loving relationship with him and the neighbour can fully and finally satisfy and enable us to live without shame, guilt or regret.

Wesley believed that love was essentially attractive and this should be the emphasis in service, witnessing, preaching and teaching. The goal of relating to those who do not yet know Christ is “to save their souls, to hold them up in love and holiness.”³⁵ The goal of any friendship is “to love them as ourselves (for they also are included in the word ‘neighbour’); to bear them real goodwill; to desire their happiness as sincerely as we desire the happiness of our own souls.” In other words, to

³² *Works 2*, “Original Sin,” 178.

³³ For an examination of the role of desire in our motivation, see James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

³⁴ *Works 3*, “The Important Question,” 189. Some other examples can be found in *Works 3*, “Spiritual Worship,” 97, 102; *Works 2*, “The End Of Christ’s Coming,” 478-81.

³⁵ *Works 3*, “On Pleasing All Men,” 417. See also pp. 416, 423.

honour them as creatures “who are capable of knowing, of loving, and of enjoying him [God] to all eternity.³⁶ If the essence of Christianity is love and relationship, then that relationship must be cultivated and this can only happen through a shared life. Amos 3:3 asks the question: “Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?” (NLT) This reminds us that if we are to fully and deeply share the journey, we must be open to God’s love ourselves, and freely share that love with others. This cannot be other than transformative if we are truly to share life at the deepest and most intimate of levels. This is why it is so important that we live out the love of God in our heart by offering a genuine friendship to others that is not tied to an agenda of them becoming a Christian. Sadly, in so many cases, we break the relationship if there is no response and move on to the next potential convert, leaving the person wondering just how genuine our love and friendship was in the first place. All our talk about love and relationships is meaningless in the end unless we actually put into concrete practice the full implications of the love of God in our hearts. We need to be open to forming new relationships and deepening existing ones.

It is very easy to say you love humanity in the abstract, or even to say you love someone who is at a distance; the real test is what happens when you meet face-to-face. We can ‘love’ the poor and dispossessed overseas quite easily, but what happens when we meet them on the street or at our local church? We can easily talk about ‘loving’ those who hold different opinions about doctrine, conduct or worship practices, as long as they attend a different church; what happens when they become members of our church? Very few Christians admit to racial, cultural or lifestyle prejudice and it is only when we are confronted by the physical presence of the ‘other’ that we become aware of all the negative feelings they stir up and expose. Sometimes it is much easier to allow the church rules and regulations to replace love and friendship. Our struggles to truly love others because of prejudice, misunderstanding, and faulty judgement are used by the Spirit to uncover the true state of our heart and just how passionate we really are about loving God and neighbour. Obedience flows from love of God in the heart by the Spirit, and it is not tied to a feeling of love (or any other emotion); we are to obey even if no positive feelings motivate or accompany the decision. This is where self-denial and taking up the cross are so important. There will be many occasions when we don’t ‘feel’ like helping another, or when we don’t emotionally connect with a person, but we are still to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned—for love’s sake alone.

If we are to have strong, healthy relationships that glorify God and form us into his likeness, we will need to embrace God’s grace, wisdom, discernment, and guidance. We must be receptive to the work of the Holy Spirit through the Body of Christ and the wider community. Particular cases and particular practices will always need the help of the Spirit, both personally and communally. We discern this best by looking to Scripture and the public, long-time interpretation, application and demonstration of its message. Above all, Wesley said, we must realise that no Scripture passage or teaching of the church can ever overturn the truth that God is love or his desire for us all to live in love with him and our neighbour. There is nothing to be gained, but everything to be lost, by cutting

³⁶ *Works* 3, “On Friendship with the World,” 130.

ourselves off from close, personal contact with others; nothing ultimately substitutes for close friendships, especially those that occur face-to-face. Contact by phone, internet, email, text, and video are all wonderful helps, but none are substitutes for physical presence. Wesley told Miss March (a rich gentlewoman) that she had to get personally involved with the poor in their hovels, no matter how difficult it was to her sensibilities; she couldn't do it by prayer, by giving money or paying for another to go on her behalf.³⁷ Our modern electronic communication removes us from the sights, sounds, and smells of the 'poor' and their location, nor can you reach out to touch the other as a physical sign of love, acceptance and support. You can't fully love another from a 'distance'—the incarnation is the most profound evidence for that.

Conclusion

John Wesley consistently anchored the Christian life in God's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, from the initial overtures of prevenient grace through to the experience of pure love and the new possibilities of an unending depth and richness to our bond with God and neighbour. He is convinced that God's love is fixed towards us and is utterly dependable, no matter our situation. As we allow God's love to fill the heart, our selfish, self-centred and self-willed inclinations are healed and restored to their right orientation, first toward God, then the neighbour and the rest of creation. By seeking to please God in all things, serving him with our total devotion, and enjoying his presence above all others we discover that this actually enables us to be fulfilled as human beings—to be happy. It enables and empowers every other relationship to flourish and lets us enjoy all that God has created without guilt, shame or regret. Love is constitutionally missional and sharing its richness with only a select few is to betray its nature. Because the love of God is inviting, embracing, enfolding and hospitable, these qualities will be evident in our lives to the degree that we walk in harmony with him by the power of the Spirit. The 'neighbour' is not limited to those we like or from whom we receive benefit; it embraces every human being on the planet and is active in seeking ways to serve them.

These relationships must be genuine and not simply a means to manipulate others into becoming Christians. The neighbour is to be embraced and offered hospitality simply because they are people created in God's image and for whom Christ died. Since God reaches out to all, we can do no less. Christian people and Christian communities must not become closed, self-satisfied circles that are inwardly focused on their own piety and spirituality. We must always actively seek to invite others to be a part of God's community, no matter who they are or what background they come from. A life of love can never be reduced to rules and regulations that deal only with outward behaviour and practices. They may be helpful in identifying problematic conduct and character issues, but they cannot fix them—that belongs to God's love alone. Wesley says that doctrine, conduct and worship practices are always servants of love, and love will always be manifested in these elements, but they

³⁷ *Letters* (Telford) VI: 206-07.

cannot replace it. This means we can love God and neighbour while believing, behaving, and worshipping in different ways. We need to reinvigorate our works of service in personal and community practice, for the sake of love alone. It is by a physical, shared relationship, walking and talking together, sharing experiences and meals together, and serving together that enables God to work in ways and at depths that will not happen otherwise. We must be actively involved in reaching out to new people, genuinely offering them hospitality and cultivating the relationship without the hidden agenda of seeking to make them Christian. It means that within the church we must be committed to all who form part of the community and actively seek ways to nourish the relationship by serving them in love. It is precisely the struggles to enter, maintain and develop a variety of friendships that enables the Holy Spirit to work the deepest levels of transformation at a personal and community level for every one of those involved in the relationship network.