

A Living Legacy: 3. The Practices of a Methodist

1 Peter 1:13-16

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In 1791, just days before his death, John Wesley sent a letter – the final letter that he would write – to William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was the tireless advocate in the British House of Commons for the abolition of slavery. In his letter, Wesley writes:

“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing. Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it... That he who has guided you from youth up may continue to strengthen you in this and all things is the prayer of...your affectionate servant, John Wesley.”

This seems to be a fitting introduction to the third message in our series on what it means to be Methodist. Wesley was encouraging Wilberforce in his fight against one of the greatest social ills of the time – but at a deeper level - this was Wesley’s call to holiness. That’s the message in this morning’s scripture: That is, “be holy as God is holy.” That’s a tall order! On one hand it seems utterly impossible and on the other it seems utterly pretentious – “I’m going to be as holy as God!” But when I think of holiness, I think of the mirror. I use the mirror to see how I look. I use the mirror because I want to look my best – and to be honest, I want to look better than I am! Holiness is being at our best. The book Genesis tells us that we have been created in the image of God – and when I look in the mirror I keep hoping to see that image – I keep hoping to become more than I am – so that what shines through is Jesus Christ. That’s holiness. That ought to be our living legacy.

Wesley realized that to be an altogether Christian is to surrender oneself wholly and completely to God and to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength – and to love one’s neighbors as oneself. Be holy as God is holy – personal holiness. But Wesley said, “There is no holiness without social holiness”. It is not only our personal lives that can be out of sorts, so can the world. And both must be brought into alignment with God. And that requires certain practices. **This morning, I want to focus on the practices of the early Methodists in the hope that these practices will be ours as well – as we live for Christ.**

Wesley’s aim was not to start a new denomination. He was a clergy in the Church of England. He resisted efforts to create a new church – and only at the end of his life when Methodists came to America did he reluctantly consent to the formation of what would be called the Methodist Episcopal Church. Wesley’s aim was to start a movement within the Church of England that would revive the church and challenge people to holiness. All over Great Britain, Wesley would enter a town and start preaching, and when people responded - when they said, “yes I want that”, he would organize them into groups. No other movement had done this the

way Wesley did. When people responded, wanting to know God and live for God and be holy, he would organize them into what he called Societies for the purpose of encouraging people in their faith. They did not meet in churches or chapels but in preaching houses. So that no one would be confused that these Societies were churches, they met during the week. When people gathered in their Society, they would begin by singing hymns, then pray, read from the Bible and someone would preach. Since Wesley could not preach everywhere, he appointed lay preachers who had the gift of speaking and applying the Bible to daily life.

When the Church of England broke from the Catholic Church, it retained many of the Catholic practices – and the focus of worship was communion (much like what one would experience today when attending a Catholic Mass) But for Methodists, the focus was preaching. In fact, Wesley's preaching House in London had a three story pulpit. Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the Word of God. Good preaching, Wesley said, is preaching that connects the Bible to life.

Singing was also important. Today we see music as a way of connecting with God and experiencing God. But in the 18th Century, many people could not read, but they could remember a song. So singing became a way of teaching faith and placing the song in one's heart. John's brother, Charles, wrote as many as 10,000 hymns – hymns that were teaching the faith. Take the red hymnal and turn to the Table of Contents on page viii. John Wesley did not write a book of theology. He wrote sermons that contained theology and published books of hymns that were meant to teach the basics. The Table of Contents provides the outline: God the Father, God the Son, the Holy Spirit and the work of the Spirit (in prevenient, justifying, sanctifying, and perfecting grace), the community of faith, and a new heaven and earth. Where's this outline from? The Apostle's Creed. Singing was teaching and connecting with God in the heart.

In 1743, Wesley created the General Rules to guide the Societies - three primary rules to help the Methodists grow in their faith. These sometimes called Three Simple Rules were meant to be so simple that everyone could remember them. Because if you could remember them, you might live that way, and if you live that way, you are moving toward holiness. Even now, when United Methodist clergy are ordained, they make a commitment to practice the General Rule so that we will teach these rules. So what are these rules?

1) Do no harm. When we wake up in the morning, our first thought should be.. "I will do no harm. I will avoid evil of every kind and in every place. Anything that I know that will hurt someone or be offensive to God, I will not do it." Wouldn't this be a welcome change to what we are already seeing and hearing in this election season? We live in a tear down culture – where getting ahead requires tearing down others - and we think it works. If we get angry enough and demanding enough, we think we can get what we want. Or if you've watched sporting events – over and over again we were shown their mistakes, how they failed. Who can forget the ABC's Wide World of Sports agony of defeat! Studies show it takes five positive comments to compensate for just one negative comment – but for me, it's more like a hundred positive to compensate for one negative! One negative comment can be like a dagger to my

heart, a loop that keeps playing in my head! So let's stop the negative. We can disagree, but let's stop the tear down. That requires thinking before speaking and acting. It means being quick to listen and slow to speak. It means seeing each person as a beloved child of God. Do no harm.

2) **Do good.** *"Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can."* This is saying that is attributed to John Wesley. It sounds simple, but to seek good for everyone, saying 'yes' to God in every act with every word is only possible when we are guided always and everywhere by the love of God.

But doing good sometimes also means that we start by saying 'no'. In preparing for today's message, I saw an article about Dietrich Bonhoeffer pop up on Facebook. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and anti-Nazi dissident who was imprisoned and executed in a concentration camp during WWII. In this quote to a confirmation class in 1938, he says, "Your 'yes' to God requires your 'no' to all injustices, to all evils, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor, to all ungodliness, and to all mockery of what is holy. Your 'yes' to God requires a 'no' to everything that tries to interfere with your serving God alone, even if that's your job, your possessions, your home, or your honor in the world. Belief means decision." Sometimes doing good means starting with a 'no.'

3) Attend to the ordinances of God. Or some have paraphrased this as **"stay in love with God."** We need certain essentials that will keep us in love with God. It's not unlike marriage. So, what keeps us in love? It wouldn't work if I kept saying to Jerry, "you know that I love you – after all I married you, didn't I?" How long would the marriage last if I never did anything to build up the relationship. To build up the relationship – to stay in love - requires spending time together and communicating and practicing daily acts of service toward each other. So it is with God. We talked about these spiritual practices throughout the month of January, in our *Soul Reset* series as we learned what it means to take care of our souls. Spiritual practices are things that God gives us to connect personally with God. What are you doing to connect personally with God? Here's Wesley's list: [slide] read the Bible, pray, fast, attend public worship, take communion, and participate in a small group. Three simple rules: Do no harm; Do good; Stay in love with God.

Wesley felt it was not enough to go to the Church of England on Sunday for the sacrament of communion. It was not enough to go to the Society during the week. There was one additional requirement. Every person in a Society had to be part of a small group that met in homes. These were called bands and then class meetings – twelve people who lived near each other and gathered together every week to encourage each other and to pray for each other. Wesley thought this was so important that he said – you'll never become the Christian God wants you to become without this kind of interaction with other Christians. Every week when you went to a class meeting you had a ticket with a scripture verse (like the memory verse cards we have used at times in worship). But the tickets also had a place for your class leader to sign that you

had attended, and when you showed up at the Society you would present your ticket in order to be a member in good standing. That's how seriously meeting in a small group was taken.

It's the reason we talk so much about faith groups here at Messiah Church and keep encouraging everyone to participate. John Wesley was founder of small group ministry. Growing in your faith, being the person God wants you to be is not something you can do simply by attending worship. Worship is important, but in worship, we don't have the time to sit down and talk about what's on your heart – our challenges and joys and what it's like to live the faith; to build community and deepen relationship.

Be holy as God is holy. We can love God with head and heart but if we are to be holy as God is holy, we have to use our hands in ministry. Wesley saw that it was not enough to pursue personal holiness without social holiness. That's what it means to connect the Bible to daily life. It's why two weeks ago we were collecting snack food for Oakwood School and send 25 reading tutors across the street to read with the kids each week. It's why we collect items for Simpson Shelter and Emma Norton Residence. It's why we have youth participating in an Urban Retreat this weekend with acts of service. It's why on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 30 elementary kids gathered at Messiah Church to perform acts of service all day long. It's why we raise scholarship funds for Bloom. In 2019 alone, we contributed \$461,000 to project beyond this church – nearly 30% of all funds given in 2019. It's why we've assembled thousands of health kits and packaged tens of thousands of meals through Feed My Starving Children. It's why Methodists get involved in issues of injustice in this community and around the world. It's why in the past year people from Messiah have gone to Kenya, Puerto Rico, Pine Ridge Reservation, Haiti, Guatemala and the Midwest Distribution Center in Illinois. It's why we send youth to STORM camp in Southern Minnesota and to mission trips to places like Benton Harbor, Michigan. We do this because holiness is more than Bible knowledge – it is more than loving God and having heart-warming experiences. Holiness also requires that we roll up our sleeves and serve God with our hands. This is what God wants. It is what it means to live a life of love – to be holy as God is holy.

John Wesley lived to be almost 88 years old – at a time when the average life expectancy was 35. He outlived most of his friends, his family and his critics. He said that in his 80s he was a better preacher than he was in his 20s. He continued to preach regularly until the week before he died. The week before his death, he was preaching outdoors, when he caught a cold and came down with a fever. During that final week, his friends gathered around his bed as he went in and out of consciousness. Somehow he had the strength to sing, and he began to sing "I'll Praise my maker while I've breath". Then he said: "Best of all is God is with us." And his final word – "farewell."

In this series, it has been our hope that we would be able to teach you something of our Methodist heritage and how that heritage has shaped this church and has influenced you by your participation here. I am proud of our Methodist heritage. We have something to offer the world – not because we are better than other churches but because the Methodist heritage can still shape our lives in relevant and powerful way. Hear these words from 1 Peter once again:

Therefore, once you have your minds ready for action and you are thinking clearly, place your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed. Don't be conformed to your former desires, those that shaped you when you were ignorant. But, as obedient children, you must be holy in every aspect of your lives, just as the one who called you is holy. It is written, You will be holy, because I am holy.

Let's pray:

God, You have set before us the path but we have wandered off on our own to try to find our way. Remind us what it means to live a life as holy as you. To wake every morning with the intention of doing good to everyone meet. To know what it means to examine our hearts so that we do no harm in this world. Our greatest desire is to always and everywhere, stay in love with you. Help us to seek You every day, to acknowledge that we need Your wisdom and guidance, and help us to return to the path and walk with You. In the name of Christ, who is our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. **Amen.**

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of February 16, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Almighty God, you call us to holiness so that we may become truly free. Increase our hunger to understand and act on your guidance. Keep our eyes and hearts open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around us who need to feel your touch through us. Help us to embrace true justice and nurture a giving heart so that we might be your shining lights of love in the world. Amen.

Monday, February 17

Scripture: Matthew 5:13-16

"You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can't be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.

Observation: John Wesley, following the teaching of Jesus, said, "Christianity is essentially a social religion." Jesus did not seclude himself on an isolated island, and he does not call Christians to leave their cultures for an exclusively Christian environment. God's followers are to be "salt and light" in the world. God empowers us to preserve what is good and live lives that shine light into the darkness of our world.

Application: Lamps light up the darkness. God still calls us to be his light, to help people lost in the darkness find their way to the light, and ultimately dispel the darkness. What choices do you make in your attitudes and actions to ensure that those around you see Jesus' light more clearly as they spend time with you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are not a secret to be kept. Shine your light of love through me, this day and every day, and use me to make the world you love a bit more like the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

Tuesday, February 18

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-10

However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

Observation: The apostle Paul wrote that when we accept God's grace, we live as people created in Christ Jesus to do good things. To people who argued that grace made Christian actions unnecessary, Wesley said, "Surely there are works of mercy ... which are real means of grace. They are more especially such to those that perform them with a single eye. And those that neglect them, do not receive the grace which otherwise they might."

Application: What is your life's purpose? (Saying "I don't know" doesn't mean you don't have one. Even if you've never given it conscious thought, you make choices each day based on some inner vision of who you are and what you're here for.) Spend some quiet time today reflecting on your life's purpose in the light of what Ephesians 2:10 says about God's intention for your life.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for offering me the gift of your transforming grace. Guide me this day as I seek to live into the reality of the good things you've created me to do. Amen.

Wednesday, February 19

Scripture: 1 John 3:14-18

We know that we have transferred from death to life, because we love the brothers and sisters. The person who does not love remains in death. Everyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that murderers don't have eternal life residing in them. This is how we know love: Jesus laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. But if someone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but refuses to help—how can the love of God dwell in a person like that? Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth.

Observation: The apostle John said no one filled with God's love could see a brother or sister in need and not try to help. John Wesley wrote of a time when he lived this out: "At Hannam, four miles from Bristol ... I made a collection in our congregation for the relief of the poor, [outside] Lawford's gate; who, having no work ... and no assistance from the parish wherein they lived, were reduced to the last extremity. I made another collection on Thursday and a third on Sunday, by which we were enabled to feed a hundred, sometimes a hundred and fifty, a day, of those whom we found to need it most."

Application: John used strong words about those who saw their brothers and sisters in need, and didn't care. He said such people hated their brothers and sisters, which made them

murderers! How can we become more like Wesley, who instead of saying “Someone ought to help those hungry people” took simple, direct action and helped?

Prayer: Loving Lord, you taught us that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). Keep growing a heart within me that rejoices in the freedom and satisfaction of your kind of giving. Amen.

Thursday, February 20

Scripture: Isaiah 1:11-18; 42:1-7

What should I think about all your sacrifices? says the LORD. I’m fed up with entirely burned offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I don’t want the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from you, this trampling of my temple’s courts? Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me. New moon, sabbath, and the calling of an assembly—I can’t stand wickedness with celebration! I hate your new moons and your festivals. They’ve become a burden that I’m tired of bearing. When you extend your hands, I’ll hide my eyes from you. Even when you pray for a long time, I won’t listen. Your hands are stained with blood. Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. Come now, and let’s settle this, says the LORD, Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be white as snow. If they are red as crimson, they will become like wool.

But here is my servant, the one I uphold; my chosen, who brings me delight, I’ve put my spirit upon him; he will bring justice to the nations. He won’t cry out or shout aloud or make his voice heard in public. He won’t break a bruised reed; he won’t extinguish a faint wick, but he will surely bring justice. He won’t be extinguished or broken until he has established justice in the land. The coastlands await his teaching. God the LORD says—the one who created the heavens, the one who stretched them out, the one who spread out the earth and its offspring, the one who gave breath to its people and life to those who walk on it—I, the LORD, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to lead the prisoners from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.

Observation: The prophet Isaiah pointed out, on God’s behalf, the injustices rampant in ancient Israel. Then, three times in four verses, Isaiah 42 said God’s servant would bring justice. John Wesley visited one “poor prisoner,” falsely charged with a large offense instead of the petty crime he’d committed. He wrote indignantly, “2) Where is the justice of swelling four pounds into five hundred and seventy-seven? 3) Where is the common sense of taking up fourteen sheets to tell a story that may be told in ten lines? 4) Where is the mercy of thus grinding the face of the poor? Thus sucking the blood of a poor, beggared prisoner?”

Application: Isaiah said on God’s behalf, “Stop bringing worthless offerings.” As you read the rest of the passage, what made their offerings “worthless”? What does it look like in the United States in 2020 to “help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow”?

Prayer: Lord God, sometimes trying to live out your justice can seem confusing—so many points of view, so many conflicting interests. Give me your wisdom to live a life that honors your ideal of justice. Amen.

Friday, February 21

Scripture: James 2:14-26

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity. Someone might claim, "You have faith and I have action." But how can I see your faith apart from your actions? Instead, I'll show you my faith by putting it into practice in faithful action. It's good that you believe that God is one. Ha! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble with fear. Are you so slow? Do you need to be shown that faith without actions has no value at all? What about Abraham, our father? Wasn't he shown to be righteous through his actions when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? See, his faith was at work along with his actions. In fact, his faith was made complete by his faithful actions. So the scripture was fulfilled that says, *Abraham believed God, and God regarded him as righteous*. What is more, Abraham was called God's friend. So you see that a person is shown to be righteous through faithful actions and not through faith alone. In the same way, wasn't Rahab the prostitute shown to be righteous when she received the messengers as her guests and then sent them on by another road? As the lifeless body is dead, so faith without actions is dead.

Observation: Wesley had learned firsthand the folly of trying to earn God's favor through good works. But he found, as James had, that some other Christians thought "salvation by faith" meant good works are optional. Like James, Wesley knew that true faith produces actions that honor God and bless others.

Application: Notice that James didn't talk about a good balance between faith and works, as though we need a 50-50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both, and our works need to grow out of our faith, as a grateful response to God's gracious acceptance of us. What are some of the actions, the works, which you have seen grow in your life as you have responded to God's grace?

Prayer: Loving Lord, you have accepted me as your child, and you have begun to reshape the way I live as I respond to your grace. Please continue your work in my life, that my works may always bring you glory. Amen.

Saturday, February 22

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

"Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left. "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.' "Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' "Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and

sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me. I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’ “Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn’t do anything to help you?’ Then he will answer, ‘I assure you that when you haven’t done it for one of the least of these, you haven’t done it for me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

Observation: From history, we can see that John Wesley and his followers made a big impact for good, first in England and then in America. But it took many, many (often small) acts of grace and caring. In his sermon “The Reward of the Righteous,” Wesley urged his hearers, “While you are promoting this comprehensive charity, which contains feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, lodging the stranger; indeed all good works in one; let those animating words be written on your hearts, and sounding in your ears: ‘Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, ye have done it unto ME.’”

Application: What word or phrase speaks to you from scripture? Wesley called the Methodists to the kind of life Jesus calls his followers to live. What are the main ways you are involved in honoring God by serving others? Consider serving in one way you never have before. (If you need ideas, you’ll find many at MessiahChurch.org – click on “Make a Difference.”)

Prayer: O God, keep my eyes and my heart open to see your face in the faces of hurting people around me who need your touch through me. Amen.