

*Holiness of Heart and Life*  
*Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 12:1-2*  
*October 11, 2009*

Ted Turner has owned a cable television network, a major league baseball team, and entered his yacht in the highest international competitions. He is a shrewd businessman, an outspoken maverick, a generous philanthropist, an entrepreneur, and a very wealthy man.

Ted Turner's father was something of a failure as a businessman. He owned a second-rate advertising agency, but it was often on the verge of bankruptcy. Nevertheless, he taught his son that to be somebody you always have to win and that to come out on top you have to defeat others and put them down. When Ted Turner's father died, he took over the nearly bankrupt advertising agency. He made it a standout success, so much so that he made the cover of *Success* magazine. In a poignant interview, Ted Turner told how, when he saw his picture on the cover of *Success*, he took it, held it up to the heavens, and with tears in his eyes he cried out, "Hey Dad! Is this good enough?"

To some degree all of us can identify with that yearning for approval, for attention, for affirmation. "Is this good enough?" "Am I good enough?" There is something within us that needs to win the blessing and love of others. We often feel that we have to prove ourselves in order to earn the endorsement of others with our good works.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, could identify with this struggle. He was tormented by the question of the rich young ruler, "What must I do to be saved?" He wanted some assurance of God's love. In his younger days, Wesley worked hard to earn God's favor. He wanted nothing more than to please God. He did holy things. He did good deeds. He rose every morning at 4:00 a.m. to pray. He went to the wilds of the Georgia penal colony as a missionary. He preached in the fields and on the street corners. He lived a plain and simple life. Jesus said, "Feed the hungry," so he fed the hungry. Jesus said, "Clothe the naked," so he clothed the naked. Jesus said, "Give water to those who thirst," so Wesley gave water to those who thirsted. Jesus said, "Visit those in prison," so he visited the prisoners. He wrote tracts condemning the slave trade. He started a school for poor children. He wrote medical tracts to bring physical health to those who could not afford a physician's care.

Yet still his spirit was troubled. His methodical devotions and his performance of deeds did not grant him the assurance he sought. His heart remained unchanged. He was uncertain of God's love. He was dutiful in what he did, but he possessed no joy. He yearned to experience assurance of God's love, and it remained an unfulfilled longing.

Finally at the age of 35 John Wesley received the affirmation he sought. On May 24, 1738, in London, he recorded these words in his journal: “In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation. And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away **my** sins, even **mine**, and saved **me** from the law of sin and death.”

For Wesley it was a moment of pure grace, a gift of God. He had done nothing to earn it. It came not as a result of his ceaseless striving to win God’s approval. It came at God’s initiative. With no prompting, God touched his heart with a warm assurance of God’s saving grace and love. He finally knew that he was “good enough,” not because of anything he did, but simply because he was.

With his heart strangely warmed, Wesley understood that we are saved not by our good works, but rather we are saved by grace through faith. Our works are a response to the amazing gift of God’s grace in our lives.

One way to summarize the theology of John Wesley is with the phrase he often used: we are called to holiness of heart and life. He emphasized both an inward experience and our outward lifestyle. Let’s look at the various dimensions of that phrase: holiness of heart and life.

The Hebrew word for holy is *kadosh*. The root of that word has to do with difference, being set apart from other things. As the Holy One, God is set apart from the rest of creation. To be holy is to be different in the sense of being of God as opposed to being of the world or even being a typical human being.

When Wesley refers to the heart, he means the inner intent, attitude, or disposition. Our disposition is our prevalent mood or attitude toward life. Last week at the hospital I encountered a physical therapist who had an enjoyable disposition. She was very pleasant with her patients, bringing a brightness and joy with her presence. By holiness of heart, Wesley encourages a disposition that reflects the very nature of God. A holy heart reflects the love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, and justice of God.

When speaking of life, Wesley means our behavior and conduct. In our actions we are called to be holy, to be different, to be better than average, to go the extra mile as Jesus does for others.

It is also important that the heart and life be congruent. An inner intent of compassion that is not matched by outer manifestation is useless posturing. An attempt at right living that is not rooted in inner transformation is simply arrogant self-righteousness. In fact we cannot have one without the other. Right works require a right heart and a right heart requires right works. God is honored only by both holiness of heart and life.

Wesley believed that it was possible to attain holiness in this life. He referred to it as perfection, by which he meant being perfect in love, love of God and love of neighbor. We witness the growth in holiness or perfection in a story from Wesley's own life. Early in his ministry he wrote, "Resentment at an affront is sin, and I have been guilty of this a thousand times."

Later Wesley was slandered by Bishop Lavington, an Anglican Church dignitary. Lavington spewed contempt for the Methodists, calling them stupid, irrational, hysterical, treacherous, and politically treasonous. This was mild compared to his vilification of John Wesley himself. Wesley could rightly feel indignant at this assault upon his character and the people he served.

Years later Wesley found himself at worship in an Anglican church whose communion service that Sunday was administered by none other than Bishop Lavington. Later that same day Wesley wrote in his journal, "I was well-pleased to partake of the Lord's Supper with my old opponent, Bishop Lavington. O may we sit down together in the Kingdom of our Father." When he wrote, "I was well-pleased," he was transparently sincere. He was resentment-free, even before the man who repeatedly slandered him and his people, resentment-free before the man who, two weeks later, would be found dead.

I will confess with Wesley that resentment is a sin with which I struggle. Wesley mentioned three other sins that are common challenges: pride, anger, and the desire for control. I know that these are among the things that clog the arteries of my inner heart, preventing my heart and life from being pure and holy. I have some work to do to purge my heart of sin and impurities so that I am holy in heart and life. But Wesley assures me that I need not do this work alone. If I am open to the sanctifying grace of God, God will work within my heart to cleanse it from sin. Sanctifying grace is the gift of God that makes us holy. It continues to work throughout our lifetimes, softening the rough edges, purifying the heart. The holy-making grace of God helps us grow toward a pure heart and right living. I'm grateful that God does not give up on me, for my need is ever before me. Just when I think I've conquered one inner battle, another confronts me and reveals my need to grow even deeper.

Our work is to open ourselves to the sanctifying grace of God through the spiritual practices. As we worship, pray, search the Scriptures, partake of the Lord's Supper, fast, and participate in the Christian community, we open ourselves to the channels whereby God's grace is given. Here in the community of faith the impurities that clog our arteries are confronted and melted down, freeing us for the healthy, life-giving flow of God's love. As God's grace becomes the lifeblood of our very beings, we become new creatures. Our lives manifest the nature of Christ within us.

Ted Turner was a man yearning for approval, aching for the affirmation that he was “good enough.” John Wesley longed for a heart-warming assurance of God’s love. The grace of our loving God is the source of the true affirmation we all need and seek. As we open ourselves to the powerful, holy grace of God, we receive not only the assurance of God’s love, but we find our very lives and beings transformed. Our hardened arteries are cleansed of sin. The grace of God flows freely, stirring our hearts to love and our bodies to service.

I close with a hymn of Charles Wesley, John’s brother, and author of over 5,000 hymns:

O for a heart to praise my God, a heart from sin set free...  
A heart in every thought renewed and full of love divine,  
Perfect and right and pure and good, a copy, Lord of thine.  
Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart; come quickly from above;  
write thy new name upon my heart, thy new, best name of Love.

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