



# A LIFE WORTHY OF THE GOSPEL

## Lesson 5 – Wesley: Transforming Grace

Dear friends:

The last of our four models for understanding Christian moral life comes from John Wesley. Although he was the founder of Methodism, he himself remained a priest of the Anglican Church all of his life, and his contribution to Christian understanding comes from his distinctive location. The English Protestant church occupies a sort of middle position. It is shaped on one hand by the theological inheritance of the Reformation, and on the other by the forms of worship and sacraments and devotion that come down to it from the older Catholic tradition. Drawing upon both of these resources, Wesley was able to craft a powerful working account of how Christian faith is lived, and how the practice of the faith transforms both the individual and the believing community.

Wesley begins with basic Protestant convictions about the centrality of Scripture and the sufficiency of faith as the foundation of salvation. Like all who come after Luther, he is fond of quoting Romans: “By grace are you saved through faith, and not of yourselves, so that no one can boast.” Everything begins with God’s act of cleansing us from sin and restoring us to right relationship. But to these Wesley adds a dynamic understanding of the grace of God. In his view, divine grace is more than a continual forgiveness that leaves us unchanged. It is the activity of the Holy Spirit to bring about a basic transformation in us. This is a continual and on-going process, one that in the course of our lives renews in us the image of God in which each of us was made. Its aim is to bring about holiness in heart and in behavior, a change that remakes both the individual believer and the community of faith.

But Wesley does not attribute this working of the Holy Spirit to some vague and mystical magic in which we have no part. Instead, the work of God to be done in us must be done with our cooperation, by the means that God has supplied and in which God promises to meet us if we come in humility and trust. Wesley’s movement is called “Methodist” because of this stress upon method. The daily practices of prayer and Bible study, the attendance at worship and the sacraments, even the regular meeting with other Christians for mutual encouragement and correction, all of these are the means by which we offer ourselves up to God’s grace. Now Wesley is very careful not to describe this as a kind of transaction, in which we complete our prescribed rituals and God gives us goodness in exchange! All is mercy, and all is God’s work alone, given by God in freedom and power. But the process of “sanctification,” of being made holy, is what Christian life is for and about, and the practical business of living it consists of putting oneself continually before God, waiting in faith and confidence for God to work the change that is needed. And its final aim is that we should love as God loves, with joyful and undivided hearts. The result is an account of Christian life that is at the same time both trusting and vigorous, both assured of God’s welcome and continually moving toward the fullness of holiness.

Sincerely,

*Sondra*