

Reading
with
Leader's
Guide

VINTAGE
Saints & Sinners

John Wesley (1703-1791)

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. I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart.

But it was not long before the enemy suggested, "This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?" Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth, them according to the counsels of His own will. After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations, but I cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He "sent me help from his holy place." ...

The moment I awaked, "Jesus, Master," was in my heart and in my mouth; and I found all my strength lay in keeping my eyes fixed upon Him, and my soul waiting on Him continually. Being at St. Paul's again in the afternoon, 'My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord: with my mouth will I ever be showing forth Thy truth...' Yet the enemy injected a fear, 'If thou dost believe, why is there not a more sensible change?' I answered (yet not I), 'That I know not. But this I know, I have no peace with God.' And I sin not today, and Jesus my Master has forbid me to take thought for the morrow.

'But is not any sort of fear,' continued the tempter, 'a proof that thou dost not believe?' I desired my Master to answer for me, and opened His Book upon those words of St. Paul, 'Without were fightings, within were fears.' Then, inferred I, well may fears be within me; but I must go on, and tread them under my feet.

Have you ever had a "heart strangely warmed" spiritual experience?

What do you notice about John Wesley's narrative account?

What thoughts, struggles, doubts come up in his mind? How does he respond?

Are any of Wesley's insights helpful for your own life?

From *Christian Perfection*

Watch and pray continually against pride ... If you think you have more than you really have; or if you think you are so taught of God, as no longer to need man's teaching; pride lieth at the door. Yes; you have need to be taught... yea, by all men. For God sendeth by whom he will send. Do not therefore say to any who would advise or reprove you, 'You are blind; you cannot teach me.' Do not say, 'This is your wisdom, your carnal reason;' but calmly weigh the thing before God.... To imagine none can teach you, but those who are themselves saved from sin, is a very great and dangerous mistake.

Be always ready to own any fault you have been in. If you have at any time thought, spoke, or acted wrong, be not backward to acknowledge it. Never dream that this will hurt the cause of God; no, it will further it. Be therefore open and frank, when you are taxed with anything; do not seek either to evade or disguise it; but let it appear just as it is, and you will thereby not hinder, but adorn, the gospel.

Who have been your unexpected spiritual teachers?

What does it feel like to acknowledge your own faults? When have you seen someone do that well?

Do agree that being honest and open furthers the cause of God? Could it ever hurt the cause of the gospel?

Beware of enthusiasm. Give no place to a heated imagination. Do not hastily ascribe things to God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions, or revelations to be from God. They may be from him. They may be from nature. They may be from the devil. Therefore, 'believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they be of God.' Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of enthusiasm every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture...

One general inlet to enthusiasm is expecting the end without the means; the expecting knowledge, for instance, without searching the Scriptures, and consulting the children of God; the expecting spiritual strength without constant prayer, and steady watchfulness; the expecting any blessing without hearing the word of God at every opportunity....

What do you hear Wesley saying about "enthusiasm"—and its remedy?

How is enthusiasm exhibited among Christians today?

Is enthusiasm something to be avoided?

Another ground of...a thousand mistakes, is not considering deeply, that love is the highest gift of God; humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all the gifts above-mentioned are either the same with, or infinitely inferior to, it.

It were well you should be thoroughly sensible of this, -- 'the heaven of heavens is love.' There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, 'Have you received this or that blessing?' if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them upon a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more, but more of that love described in the thirteenth of the Corinthians. [1 Cor. 13] You can go no higher than this...

What is at the heart of Wesley's teaching here?

If you truly believed what he says, how would your life be changed?

Beware of thinking, 'Because I am filled with love, I need not have so much holiness. Because I pray always, therefore I need no set time for private prayer. Because I watch always, therefore I need no particular self-examination.' ... Let this be our voice: 'I prize thy commandments above gold or precious stones. O what love have I unto thy law! all the day long is my study in it.'

Beware of Antinomian** books; particularly the works of Dr. Crisp and Mr. Saltmarsh. They contain many excellent things; and this makes them the more dangerous. O be warned in time! Do not play with fire. Do not put your hand on the hole of a cockatrice' den. I entreat you, beware of bigotry.

Antinomian: relating to the view that Christians are released by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law.

What do you make of Wesley's advice here?

What does this word "bigotry" mean to you?

Lose no opportunity of doing good in any kind. Be zealous of good works; willingly omit no work, either of piety or mercy. Do all the good you possibly can to the bodies and souls of men....Be always employed; lose no shred of time; gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost. And whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might. Be 'slow to speak,' and wary in speaking. 'In a multitude of words there wanteth not sin.' Do not talk much; neither long at a time. Few can converse profitably above an hour. Keep at the utmost distance from pious chit-chat, from religious gossiping.

Where have you heard these themes in your own life?

What feelings come up for you when you hear Wesley's words?

What is the upside of this advice? What is the downside?

Beware of desiring anything but God. Now you desire nothing else; every other desire is driven out; see that none enter again. 'Keep thyself pure;' let your 'eye' remain 'single, and your whole body shall be full of light.' Admit no desire of pleasing food, or any other pleasure of sense; no desire of pleasing the eye or the imagination, by anything grand, or new, or beautiful; no desire of money, of praise, or esteem; of happiness in any creature. You may bring these desires back; but you need not; you need feel them no more. O stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free.

Again... Where have you heard these themes in your own life?

What feelings come up for you when you hear Wesley's words?

What is the upside of this advice? What is the downside?

Beware of a dividing spirit; shun whatever has the least aspect that way. ...Suffer not one thought of separating from your brethren, whether their opinions agree with yours or not. Do not dream that any man sins in not believing you, in not taking your word; or that this or that opinion is essential to the work, and both must stand or fall together. Beware of impatience of contradiction. Do not condemn or think hardly of those who cannot see just as you see, or who judge it their duty to contradict you, whether in a great thing or a small...O beware of touchiness, of testiness, not bearing to be spoken to; starting at the least word; and flying from those who do not implicitly receive mine or another's sayings!

What is a dividing spirit? What is the place of honest disagreement?

What can you learn from Wesley here?

Give no offence which can possibly be avoided; see that your practice be in all things suitable to your profession, adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour. Be particularly careful in speaking of yourself: You may not, indeed, deny the work of God; but speak of it, when you are called thereto, in the most inoffensive manner possible. Avoid all magnificent, pompous words; indeed...Rather speak of the particulars which God has wrought for you. ...And answer any other plain question that is asked with modesty and simplicity.

Where have you seen someone exemplify this attitude?

What else are you thinking at this point?

And if any of you should at any time fall from what you now are, if you should again feel pride or unbelief, or any temper from which you are now delivered; do not deny, do not hide, do not disguise it at all, at the peril of your soul. At all events go to one in whom you can confide, and speak just what you feel. God will enable him to speak a word in season, which shall be health to your soul. And surely He will again lift up your head, and cause the bones that have been broken to rejoice.

In whom can you confide? What has been the experience of confession in your own life?

Be exemplary in all things; particularly in outward things, (as in dress,) in little things, in the laying out of your money, (avoiding every needless expense,) in deep, steady seriousness, and in the solidity and usefulness of all your conversation. So shall you be 'a light shining in a dark place.' So shall you daily 'grow in grace,' till 'an entrance be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ.'

What would it mean for you to be exemplary?

How are you shining in a dark place? How might you grown more in grace?

What piece of Wesley's counsel do you find most promising for you?