

JOHN WESLEY'S SERMONS
An Anthology

Edited by
Albert C. Outler
&
Richard P. Heitzenrater

ABINGDON PRESS
NASHVILLE

the midst of us, knoweth that if any man die without this faith and this love, good it were for him that he had never been born. Awake, then, thou that sleepest, and call upon thy God: call in the day when he may be found. Let him not rest till he 'make his goodness to pass before thee, till he proclaim unto thee the name of the Lord'—'the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin.' Let no man persuade thee by vain words to rest short of this prize of thy high calling. But cry unto him day and night who 'while we were without strength died for the ungodly', until thou knowest in whom thou hast believed, and canst say, 'My Lord and my God.' Remember 'always to pray and not to faint', till thou also canst lift up thy hand unto heaven and declare to him that liveth for ever and ever, 'Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee.'

11. May we all thus experience what it is to be not almost only, but altogether Christians! Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus, knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us!

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

Sermon 40 – 1741

AN INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

For Wesley, salvation was the total restoration of the deformed image of God in us, and its fullness was the recovery of our negative power not to sin and our positive power to love God supremely. Wesley chose to call that furthest reach of grace in sanctification and its triumphs in this life 'Christian Perfection', a position that he had stated earlier in 'The Circumcision of the Heart' (1733). Just as justification and regeneration are thresholds for the Christian life in earnest ('what God does for us'), so also sanctification is 'what God does in us', fulfilling the human potential according to his primal design. Few Christians had ever denied some such prospect after death; few, in the West at least, had ever envisioned it as a realistic possibility in this life. Thus, Wesley's encouragement to his people to 'go on to perfection' and to 'expect to be made perfect in love in this life' aroused lively fears that this teaching would foster more of the self-righteous perfectionism already made objectionable by earlier pietists.

This fear was in the background of Bishop Edmund Gibson's interview with Wesley in the latter end of the year 1740. When Wesley told him 'without any disguise or reserve' what he meant by perfection, the bishop suggested that he 'publish it to all the world'. John proceeded to write and publish this sermon in 1741, appending his brother Charles's poem, 'The Promise of Sanctification'. There is no record of Wesley actually preaching this sermon, and there is no other record of his use of Phil. 3:12 as a sermon text.

Wesley maintained that he had no difficulty in harmonizing 'Christian perfection' with his later emphases on 'faith alone' and 'assurance'. Many Protestants were bound to see in the Wesleyan doctrine, despite all its formal disclaimers, a bald advertisement of spiritual pride and implicit works-righteousness. Even the Methodists, working from their own unexamined Latin traditions of forensic righteousness, tended to interpret 'perfection' in terms of a perfected spiritual elitism and so misunderstood Wesley and the early Eastern traditions of *teleos* as a never ending aspiration for all of love's perfecting fullness. Thus, 'Christian Perfection' came to be the most distinctive and also the most widely misunderstood of all Wesley's doctrines. He continued to teach it, however, as the farthest horizon of his vision of Christian existence, an idea with radical implications for personal ethics and for social transformation as well.

Christian Perfection

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.
Philippians 3:12

1. There is scarce any expression in Holy Writ which has given more offence than this. The word 'perfect' is what many cannot bear. The very sound of it is an abomination to them. And whosoever 'preaches perfection' (as the phrase is), i.e. asserts that it is attainable in this life, runs great hazard of being accounted by them worse than a heathen man or a publican.

2. And hence some have advised, wholly to lay aside the use of those expressions, 'because they have given so great offence'. But are they not found in the oracles of God? If so, by what authority can any messenger of God lay them aside, even though all men should be offended? We have not so learned Christ; neither may we thus give place to the devil. Whatsoever God hath spoken, that will we speak, whether men will hear or whether they will forbear: knowing that then alone can any minister of Christ be 'pure from the blood of all men', when he hath 'not shunned to declare unto them all the counsel of God'.

3. We may not therefore lay these expressions aside, seeing they are the words of God, and not of man. But we may and ought to explain the meaning of them, that those who are sincere of heart may not err to the right hand or to the left from the mark of the prize of their high calling. And this is the more needful to be done because in the verse already repeated the Apostle speaks of himself as not perfect: 'Not', saith he, 'as though I were already perfect.' And yet immediately after, in the fifteenth verse, he speaks of himself, yea and many others, as perfect. 'Let us', saith he, 'as many as be perfect, be thus minded.'

4. In order therefore to remove the difficulty arising from this seeming contradiction, as well as to give light to them who are pressing forward to the mark, and that those who are lame be not turned out of the way, I shall endeavour to show,

First, in what sense Christians are *not*, and

Secondly, in what sense they *are*, perfect.

I. 1. In the first place I shall endeavour to show in what sense Christians are *not perfect*. And both from experience and Scripture it appears, first, that they are not perfect in knowledge: they are not so perfect in this life as to be free from ignorance. They know, it may be, in common with other men, many

things relating to the present world; and they know, with regard to the world to come, the general truths which God hath revealed. They know likewise (what 'the natural man receiveth not', for these things 'are spiritually discerned') 'what manner of love it is wherewith the Father hath loved them, that they should be called the sons of God'. They know 'the mighty working of his Spirit' in their hearts, and the wisdom of his providence directing all their paths, and causing all things to work together for their good. Yea, they know in every circumstance of life what the Lord requireth of them, and how 'to keep a conscience void of offence both toward God and toward man'.

2. But innumerable are the things which they know not. 'Touching the Almighty himself', 'they cannot search him out to perfection.' 'Lo, these are but a part of his ways; but the thunder of his power who can understand?' They cannot understand, I will not say, how 'there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one'; or how the eternal Son of God 'took upon himself the form of a servant'; but not any one attribute, not any one circumstance of the divine nature. Neither is it for them 'to know the times and seasons' when God will work his great works upon the earth; no, not even those which he hath in part revealed, by his servants the prophets, since the world began. Much less do they know when God, having 'accomplished the number of his elect, will hasten his kingdom'; when 'the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat.'

3. They know not the reasons even of many of his present dispensations with the sons of men; but are constrained to rest here, though 'clouds and darkness are round about him, righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his seat.' Yea, often with regard to his dealings with themselves doth their Lord say unto them, 'What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter.' And how little do they know of what is ever before them, of even the visible works of his hands! How 'he spreadeth the north over the empty place, and hangeth the earth upon nothing.' How he unites all the parts of this vast machine by a secret chain which cannot be broken. So great is the ignorance, so very little the knowledge of even the best of men.

4. No one then is so perfect in this life as to be free from ignorance. Nor, secondly, from mistake, which indeed is almost an unavoidable consequence of it; seeing those who 'know but in part' are ever liable to err touching the things which they know not. 'Tis true the children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation. They do not 'put darkness for light, or light for darkness', neither 'seek death in the error of their life'. For they are 'taught of God', and the way which he teaches them, the way of holiness, is so plain that 'the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err therein.' But in things unessential to salvation they do err, and that frequently. The best and wisest of men are frequently mistaken even with regard to facts; believing those things

not to have been which really were, or those to have been done which were not. Or suppose they are not mistaken as to the fact itself, they may be with regard to its circumstances; believing them, or many of them, to have been quite different from what in truth they were. And hence cannot but arise many farther mistakes. Hence they may believe either past or present actions which were or are evil to be good; and such as were or are good to be evil. Hence also they may judge not according to truth with regard to the characters of men; and that not only by supposing good men to be better, or wicked men to be worse, than they are, but by believing them to have been or to be good men who were or are very wicked; or perhaps those to have been or to be wicked men who were or are holy and unrepovable.

5. Nay, with regard to the Holy Scriptures themselves, as careful as they are to avoid it, the best of men are liable to mistake, and do mistake day by day; especially with respect to those parts thereof which less immediately relate to practice. Hence even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in Holy Writ; nor is their difference of opinion any proof that they are not the children of God on either side. But it is a proof that we are no more to expect any living man to be *infallible* than to be *omniscient*.

6. If it be objected to what has been observed under this and the preceding head that St. John speaking to his brethren in the faith says, 'Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and know all things' (1 John 2:20), the answer is plain—'Ye know all things that are needful for your soul's health.' That the Apostle never designed to extend this farther, that he could not speak it in an absolute sense, is clear first from hence: that otherwise he would describe the disciple as 'above his Master'; seeing Christ himself, as man, knew not all things. 'Of that hour', saith he, 'knoweth no man, no, not the Son, but the Father only.' It is clear, secondly, from the Apostle's own words that follow: 'These things have I written unto you concerning them that deceive you,' as well as from his frequently repeated caution, 'Let no man deceive you,' which had been altogether needless had not those very persons who had that unction from the Holy One been liable not to ignorance only but to mistake also.

7. Even Christians therefore are not so perfect as to be free either from ignorance or error. We may, thirdly, add: nor from infirmities. Only let us take care to understand this word aright. Let us not give that soft title to known sins, as the manner of some is. So, one man tells us, 'Every man has his infirmity, and mine is drunkenness.' Another has the infirmity of uncleanness; another of taking God's holy name in vain; and yet another has the infirmity of calling his brother, 'Thou fool,' or returning 'railing for railing'. It is plain that all you who thus speak, if ye repent not, shall with your infirmities go quick into hell. But I mean hereby not only those which are properly termed 'bodily infirmities', but all those inward or outward imperfections which are not of a moral nature. Such are weakness or slowness of understanding,

dullness or confusedness of apprehension, incoherency of thought, irregular quickness or heaviness of imagination. Such (to mention no more of this kind) is the want of a ready or of a retentive memory. Such in another kind are those which are commonly in some measure consequent upon these: namely slowness of speech, impropriety of language, ungracefulness of pronunciation—to which one might add a thousand nameless defects either in conversation or behaviour. These are the infirmities which are found in the best of men in a larger or smaller proportion. And from these none can hope to be perfectly freed till the spirit returns to God that gave it.

8. Nor can we expect till then to be wholly free from temptation. Such perfection belongeth not to this life. It is true, there are those who, being given up to work all uncleanness with greediness, scarce perceive the temptations which they resist not, and so seem to be without temptation. There are also many whom the wise enemy of souls, seeing [them] to be fast asleep in the dead form of godliness, will not tempt to gross sin, lest they should awake before they drop into everlasting burnings. I know there are also children of God who, being now 'justified freely', having found 'redemption in the blood of Christ', for the present feel no temptation. God hath said to their enemies, 'Touch not mine anointed, and do my children no harm.' And for this season, it may be for weeks or months, he causeth them to 'ride on high places'; he beareth them as on eagles' wings, above all the fiery darts of the wicked one. But this state will not last always, as we may learn from that single consideration that the Son of God himself, in the days of his flesh, was tempted even to the end of his life. Therefore so let his servant expect to be; for 'it is enough that he be as his Master.'

9. Christian perfection therefore does not imply (as some men seem to have imagined) an exemption either from ignorance or mistake, or infirmities or temptations. Indeed, it is only another term for holiness. They are two names for the same thing. Thus everyone that is perfect is holy, and everyone that is holy is, in the Scripture sense, perfect. Yet we may, lastly, observe that neither in this respect is there any absolute perfection on earth. There is no 'perfection of degrees', as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace', and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.

II.1. In what sense then are Christians perfect? This is what I shall endeavour, in the second place, to show. But it should be premised that there are several stages in Christian life as well as in natural: some of the children of God being but new-born babes, others having attained to more maturity. And accordingly St. John, in his first Epistle (1 John 2:12, etc.), applies himself severally to those he terms little children, those he styles young men, and those

whom he entitles fathers. 'I write unto you, little children', saith the Apostle, 'because your sins are forgiven you'; because thus far ye have attained, being 'justified freely', you 'have peace with God, through Jesus Christ'. 'I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one'; or (as he afterwards adds) 'because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you.' Ye have quenched the fiery darts of the wicked one, the doubts and fears wherewith he disturbed your first peace, and the witness of God that your sins are forgiven now 'abideth in your heart'. 'I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning.' Ye have known both the Father and the Son and the Spirit of Christ in your inmost soul. Ye are 'perfect men, being grown up to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'.

2. It is of these chiefly I speak in the latter part of this discourse; for these only are properly Christians. But even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect, or 'born of God' (an expression taken also in divers senses) as, first, not to commit sin. If any doubt of this privilege of the sons of God, the question is not to be decided by abstract reasonings, which may be drawn out into an endless length, and leave the point just as it was before. Neither is it to be determined by the experience of this or that particular person. Many may suppose they do not commit sin when they do, but this proves nothing either way. 'To the law and to the testimony' we appeal. 'Let God be true, and every man a liar.' By his Word will we abide, and that alone. Hereby we ought to be judged.

3. Now the Word of God plainly declares that even those who are justified, who are born again in the lowest sense, do not 'continue in sin'; that they cannot 'live any longer therein' (Rom. 6:1, 2); that they are 'planted together in the likeness of the death of Christ' (Rom. 6:5); that their 'old man is crucified with him, the body of sin being destroyed, so that thenceforth they do not serve sin'; that 'being dead with Christ, they are freed from sin' (Rom. 6:6, 7); that they are 'dead unto sin', and 'alive unto God' (Rom. 6:11); that 'sin hath not dominion over them', who are 'not under the law, but under grace'; but that these, 'being made free from sin, are become the servants of righteousness' (Rom. 6:15, 18).

4. The very least which can be implied in these words is that the persons spoken of therein, namely all real Christians or believers in Christ, are made free from outward sin. And the same freedom which St. Paul here expresses in such variety of phrases St. Peter expresses in that one: 'He that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; that he no longer should live . . . to the desires of men, but to the will of God' (1 Pet. 4:1-2). For this 'ceasing from sin', if it be interpreted in the lowest sense, as regarding only the outward behaviour, must denote the ceasing from the outward act, from any outward transgression of the law.

5. But most express are the well-known words of St. John in the third chapter

of his first Epistle (verse eight, etc.): 'He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.' And those in the fifth, verse eighteen: 'We know that whosoever is born of God sinneth not. But he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.'

6. Indeed it is said this means only, he sinneth not *wilfully*; or *he doth not commit sin habitually*; or, *not as other men do*; or, *not as he did before*. But by whom is this said? By St. John? No. There is no such word in the text, nor in the whole chapter, nor in all this Epistle, nor in any part of his writings whatsoever. Why, then, the best way to answer a bold assertion is simply to deny it. And if any man can prove it from the Word of God, let him bring forth his strong reasons.

7. And a sort of reason there is which has been frequently brought to support these strange assertions, drawn from the examples recorded in the Word of God: 'What', say they, 'did not Abraham himself commit sin, prevaricating and denying his wife? Did not Moses commit sin when he provoked God "at the waters of strife"? Nay, to produce one for all, did not even David, "the man after God's own heart", commit sin in the matter of Uriah the Hittite, even murder and adultery?' It is most sure he did. All this is true. But what is it you would infer from hence? It may be granted, first, that David, in the general course of his life, was one of the holiest men among the Jews. And, secondly, that the holiest men among the Jews *did sometimes commit sin*. But if you would hence infer that *all Christians do, and must commit sin, as long as they live*, this consequence we utterly deny. It will never follow from those premises.

8. Those who argue thus seem never to have considered that declaration of our Lord: 'Verily I say unto you, among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist. Notwithstanding, he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he' (Matt. 11:11). I fear indeed there are some who have imagined 'the kingdom of heaven' here to mean the kingdom of glory. As if the Son of God had just discovered to us that the least glorified saint in heaven is greater than any man upon earth! To mention this is sufficiently to refute it. There can therefore no doubt be made but 'the kingdom of heaven' here (as in the following verse, where it is said to be 'taken by force') or, 'the kingdom of God', as St. Luke expresses it, is that kingdom of God on earth whereunto all true believers in Christ, all real Christians, belong. In these words then our Lord declares two things. First, that before his coming in the flesh among all the children of men, there had not been one greater than John the Baptist; whence it evidently follows that neither Abraham, David, nor any Jew was greater than John. Our Lord, secondly, declares that he which is least in the kingdom of God (in that kingdom which he came

to set up on earth, and which 'the violent' now began 'to take by force') is greater than he. The plain consequence is, the least of these who have now Christ for their King is greater than Abraham or David or any Jew ever was. None of them was ever greater than John. But the least of these is greater than he. Not 'a greater prophet' (as some have interpreted the word), for this is palpably false in fact, but greater in the grace of God and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we cannot measure the privileges of real Christians by those formerly given to the Jews. 'Their ministration' (or dispensation) we allow 'was glorious'; but ours 'exceeds in glory'. So that whosoever would bring down the Christian dispensation to the Jewish standard, whosoever gleans up the examples of weakness recorded in the law and the prophets, and thence infers that they who have 'put on Christ' are endued with no greater strength, doth 'greatly err, neither knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God'.

9. 'But are there not assertions in Scripture which prove the same thing, if it cannot be inferred from those examples? Does not the Scripture say expressly, "Even a just man sinneth seven times a day"?' I answer, No. The Scripture says no such thing. There is no such text in all the Bible. That which seems to be intended is the sixteenth verse of the twenty-fourth chapter of the Proverbs, the words of which are these: 'A just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again.' But this is quite another thing. For, first, the words 'a day' are not in the text. So that if a just man falls seven times in his life it is as much as is affirmed here. Secondly, here is no mention of 'falling into sin' at all: what is here mentioned is 'falling into temporal affliction'. This plainly appears from the verse before, the words of which are these: 'Lay not wait, O wicked man, against the dwelling of the righteous; spoil not his resting place.' It follows, 'For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again: but the wicked shall fall into mischief.' As if he had said, 'God will deliver him out of his trouble. But when thou fallest, there shall be none to deliver thee.'

10. But, however, in other places, continue the objectors, Solomon does assert plainly, 'There is no man that sinneth not' (1 Kgs. 8:46; 2 Chron. 6:36); yea, 'there is not a just man upon earth that doth good, and sinneth not' (Eccles. 7:20). I answer: Without doubt, thus it was in the days of Solomon. Yea, thus it was from Adam to Moses, from Moses to Solomon, and from Solomon to Christ. There was *then* no man that sinned not. Even from the day that sin entered into the world there was not a just man upon earth that did good and sinned not, *until* the Son of God was manifested 'to take away our sins'. It is unquestionably true that 'the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant.' And that 'even so' they (all the holy men of old who were under the Jewish dispensation) 'were', during that infant state of the church, 'in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made under the law,

to redeem them that were under the law, that they might receive the adoption of sons'; that they might receive that 'grace which is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim. 1:10). Now therefore they 'are no more servants, but sons'. So that, whatsoever was the case of those under the law, we may safely affirm with St. John that since the gospel was given, 'He that is born of God sinneth not.'

11. It is of great importance to observe, and that more carefully than is commonly done, the wide difference there is between the Jewish and the Christian dispensation, and that ground of it which the same Apostle assigns in the seventh chapter of his Gospel, verse thirty-eight, etc. After he had there related those words of our blessed Lord, 'He that believeth on me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water,' he immediately subjoins, 'This spake he of the Spirit,' οὐδ' ἐμελλον λαμβάνειν οἱ πιστεύοντες εἰς αὐτόν, 'which they who should believe on him were afterwards to receive. For the Holy Ghost was not yet given, because that Jesus was not yet glorified.' Now the Apostle cannot mean here (as some have taught) that the miracle-working power of the Holy Ghost was not yet given. For this was given: our Lord had given it to all his apostles when he first sent them forth to preach the gospel. He then gave them 'power over unclean spirits to cast them out', power to 'heal the sick', yea, to 'raise the dead'. But the Holy Ghost was not yet given in his sanctifying graces, as he was after Jesus was glorified. It was then when 'he ascended up on high, and led captivity captive', that he 'received those gifts for men, yea, even for the rebellious, that the Lord God might dwell among them.' And 'when the day of Pentecost was fully come', then first it was that they who 'waited for the promise of the Father' were made more than conquerors over sin by the Holy Ghost given unto them.

12. That this great salvation from sin was not given till Jesus was glorified St. Peter also plainly testifies, where speaking of his 'brethren in the flesh' as now 'receiving the end of their faith, the salvation of their souls', he adds: 'Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace (i.e. the gracious dispensation) that should come unto you; searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory (the glorious salvation) that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven' (viz., at the day of Pentecost, and so unto all generations, into the hearts of all true believers). On this ground, even 'the grace which was brought unto them by the revelation of Jesus Christ', the Apostle might well build that strong exhortation, 'Wherefore, girding up the loins of your mind, . . . as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in

all manner of conversation' (1 Pet. 1:9,10, etc.).

13. Those who have duly considered these things must allow that the privileges of Christians are in no wise to be measured by what the Old Testament records concerning those who were under the Jewish dispensation, seeing the fullness of times is now come, the Holy Ghost is now given, the great salvation of God is brought unto men by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of heaven is now set up on earth; concerning which the Spirit of God declared of old (so far is David from being the pattern or standard of Christian perfection), 'He that is feeble among them at that day, shall be as David; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the Lord before them' (Zech. 12:8).

14. If therefore you would prove that the Apostle's words, 'He that is born of God sinneth not,' are not to be understood according to their plain, natural, obvious meaning, it is from the New Testament you are to bring your proofs; else you will fight as one that beateth the air. And the first of these which is usually brought is taken from the examples recorded in the New Testament. 'The Apostles themselves (it is said) committed sin; nay the greatest of them, Peter and Paul: St. Paul by his sharp contention with Barnabas, and St. Peter by his dissimulation at Antioch.' Well; suppose both Peter and Paul did then commit sin. What is it you would infer from hence? That *all the other apostles* committed sin sometimes? There is no shadow of proof in this. Or would you thence infer that *all the other Christians* of the apostolic age committed sin? Worse and worse. This is such an inference as one would imagine a man in his senses could never have thought of. Or will you argue thus?—'If two of the apostles did once commit sin, then *all other Christians, in all ages*, do, and will commit sin as long as they live.' Alas, my brother! a child of common understanding would be ashamed of such reasoning as this. Least of all can you with any colour of argument infer that any man *must* commit sin at all. No; God forbid we should thus speak. No necessity of sinning was laid upon them. The grace of God was surely sufficient for them. And it is sufficient for us at this day. With the temptation which fell on them that *was* a way to escape, as there is to every soul of man in every temptation; so that whosoever is tempted to any sin *need* not yield; for no man is tempted above that he is able to bear.

15. 'But St. Paul besought the Lord thrice, and yet he could not escape from his temptation.' Let us consider his own words literally translated: 'There was given to me a thorn, to the flesh, an angel or messenger of Satan, to buffet me. Touching this I besought the Lord thrice, that it (or he) might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in these my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses . . . ; for when I am weak, then am I strong.'

16. As this Scripture is one of the strongholds of the patrons of sin, it may be proper to weigh it thoroughly. Let it be observed then, first, it does by no means appear that this thorn, whatsoever it was, occasioned St. Paul to commit sin, much less laid him under any necessity of doing so. Therefore from hence it can never be proved that any Christian *must* commit sin. Secondly, the ancient Fathers inform us it was bodily pain: 'a violent headache', saith Tertullian (*De Pudicitia*, [S13]), to which both Chrysostom and St. Jerome agree. St. Cyprian expresses it a little more generally, in those terms, 'many and grievous torments of the flesh and of the body' ('Carnis et corporis multa ac gravia tormenta', *De Mortalitate*). Thirdly, to this exactly agree the Apostle's own words, 'A thorn to the flesh to smite, beat, or buffet me. . . . My strength is made perfect in weakness'—which same word occurs no less than four times in these two verses only. But, fourthly, whatsoever it was, it could not be either inward or outward sin. It could no more be inward stirrings than outward expressions of pride, anger, or lust. This is manifest beyond all possible exception from the words that immediately follow: 'Most gladly will I glory in these my weaknesses, that the strength of Christ rested upon me.' What! Did he glory in pride, in anger, in lust? Was it through these 'weaknesses' that the strength of Christ rested upon him? He goes on: 'Therefore I take pleasure in weaknesses; for when I am weak, then am I strong'; i.e. when I am weak *in body*, then am I strong *in spirit*. But will any man dare to say, When I am weak by pride or lust, then am I strong in spirit? I call you all to record this day, who find the strength of Christ resting upon you, can you glory in anger, or pride, or lust? Can you take pleasure in these infirmities? Do these weaknesses make you strong? Would you not leap into hell, were it possible, to escape them? Even by yourselves, then, judge whether the Apostle could glory and take pleasure in them! Let it be, lastly, observed, that this thorn was given to St. Paul 'above fourteen years' before he wrote this Epistle, which itself was wrote several years before he finished his course. So that he had after this a long course to run, many battles to fight, many victories to gain, and great increase to receive in all the gifts of God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Therefore from any spiritual weakness (if such it had been) which he *at that time* felt, we could by no means infer that he was never made strong, that Paul the aged, the father in Christ, still laboured under the same weaknesses; that he was in no higher state till the day of his death. From all which it appears that this instance of St. Paul is quite foreign to the question, and does in no wise clash with the assertion of St. John, 'He that is born of God sinneth not.'

17. 'But does not St. James directly contradict this? His words are, "In many things we offend all" (Jas. 3:2). And is not *offending* the same as *committing sin*?' In this place I allow it is. I allow the persons here spoken of did commit sin; yea, that they *all* committed many sins. But who are 'the persons here spoken of'? Why, those 'many masters' or 'teachers' whom God had not sent (probably

the same 'vain men' who taught that 'faith without works' which is so sharply reprov'd in the preceding chapter); not the Apostle himself, nor any real Christian. That in the word 'we' (used by a figure of speech common in all other as well as the inspired writings) the Apostle could not possibly include himself or any other true believer appears evidently, first, from the use of the same word in the ninth verse: 'Therewith (saith he) bless *we* God and therewith curse *we* men. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing.' True; but not out of the mouth of the Apostle, nor of anyone who is in Christ a new creature. Secondly, from the verse immediately preceding the text, and manifestly connected with it: 'My brethren, be not many masters (or teachers), knowing that *we* shall receive the greater condemnation: for in many things *we* offend all.' 'We!' Who? Not the apostles, not true believers; but they who know they should 'receive the greater condemnation' because of those many offences. But this could not be spoke of the Apostle himself, or of any who trod in his steps, seeing 'there is no condemnation for them who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.' Nay, thirdly, the very verse itself proves that 'we offend all' cannot be spoken either of all men, or of all Christians; for in it there immediately follows the mention of a man who 'offends not', as the 'we' first mentioned did; from whom therefore he is professedly distinguished, and pronounced 'a perfect man'.

18. So clearly does St. James explain himself and fix the meaning of his own words. Yet, lest anyone should still remain in doubt, St. John, writing many years after St. James, puts the matter entirely out of dispute by the express declarations above recited. But here a fresh difficulty may arise. How shall we reconcile St. John with himself? In one place he declares, 'Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin.' And again, 'We know that he which is born of God sinneth not.' And yet in another he saith, 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.' And again, 'If we say that we have not sinned we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.'

19. As great a difficulty as this may at first appear, it vanishes away if we observe, first, that the tenth verse fixes the sense of the eighth: 'If we say we have no sin' in the former being explained by, 'If we say we have not sinned' in the latter verse. Secondly, that the point under present consideration is not whether we *have or have not sinned heretofore*, and neither of these verses asserts that we *do sin, or commit sin now*. Thirdly, that the ninth verse explains both the eighth and tenth: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' As if he had said, 'I have before affirmed, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin." But let no man say, I need it not; I have no sin to be cleansed from. If we say "that we have no sin", "that we have not sinned", we deceive ourselves, and make God a liar. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, not only to forgive our sins, but also to cleanse us from all unrighteousness, that we

may go and sin no more.'

20. St. John therefore is well consistent with himself, as well as with the other holy writers; as will yet more evidently appear if we place all his assertions touching this matter in one view. He declares, first, 'The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.' Secondly, 'No man can say I have not sinned, I have no sin to be cleansed from.' Thirdly, 'But God is ready both to forgive our past sins and to save us from them for the time to come.' Fourthly, 'These things I write unto you', saith the Apostle, 'that ye may not sin: but if any man should sin', or 'have sinned' (as the word might be rendered) he need not continue in sin, seeing 'we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.' Thus far all is clear. But lest any doubt should remain in a point of so vast importance the Apostle resumes this subject in the third chapter, and largely explains his own meaning. 'Little children', saith he, 'let no man deceive you' (as though I had given any encouragement to those that continue in sin); 'he that doth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil' (1 John 3:7-10). Here the point, which till then might possibly have admitted of some doubt in weak minds, is purposely settled by the last of the inspired writers, and decided in the clearest manner. In conformity therefore both to the doctrine of St. John, and to the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: 'A Christian is so far perfect as not to commit sin.'

21. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian; yea, though he be but 'a babe in Christ'. But it is only of those who 'are strong in the Lord', and 'have overcome the wicked one', or rather of those who 'have known him that is from the beginning', that it can be affirmed they are in such a sense perfect as, secondly, to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers. First, from evil or sinful thoughts. But here let it be observed that thoughts concerning evil are not always evil thoughts; that a thought concerning sin and a sinful thought are widely different. A man, for instance, may think of a murder which another has committed, and yet this is no evil or sinful thought. So our blessed Lord himself doubtless thought of or understood the thing spoken by the devil when he said, 'All this will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me.' Yet had he no evil or sinful thought, nor indeed was capable of having any. And even hence it follows that neither have real Christians; for 'everyone that is perfect is as his master' (Luke 6:40). Therefore, if he was free from evil or sinful thoughts, so are they likewise.

22. And indeed, whence should evil thoughts proceed in the servant who is 'as his master'? 'Out of the heart of man (if at all) proceed evil thoughts'

(Mark 7:21). If therefore his heart be no longer evil, then evil thoughts can no longer proceed out of it. If the tree were corrupt, so would be the fruit. But the tree is good. The fruit therefore is good also (Matt. 12:33). Our Lord himself bearing witness: 'Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, as a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit' (Matt. 7:17-18).

23. The same happy privilege of real Christians St. Paul asserts from his own experience: 'The weapons of our warfare', saith he, 'are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds; casting down imaginations' (or 'reasonings' rather, for so the word λογισμούς signifies: all the reasonings of pride and unbelief against the declarations, promises, or gifts of God) 'and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God; and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ' (2 Cor. 10:4, etc.).

24. And as Christians indeed are freed from evil thoughts, so are they, secondly, from evil tempers. This is evident from the above-mentioned declaration of our Lord himself: 'The disciple is not above his master; but everyone that is perfect shall be as his master.' He had been delivering just before some of the sublimest doctrines of Christianity, and some of the most grievous to flesh and blood: 'I say unto you, love your enemies, do good to them which hate you: and unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other.' Now these he well knew the world would not receive, and therefore immediately adds, 'Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?' As if he had said, 'Do not confer with flesh and blood touching these things, with men void of spiritual discernment, the eyes of whose understanding God hath not opened, lest they and you perish together.' In the next verse he removes the two grand objections with which these wise fools meet us at every turn: 'these things are too grievous to be borne,' or, 'they are too high to be attained,' saying, 'The disciple is not above his master.' Therefore if I have suffered be content to tread in my steps. And doubt ye not then but I will fulfil my word: 'For everyone that is perfect shall be as his master.' But his Master was free from all sinful tempers. So therefore is his disciple, even every real Christian.

25. Every one of these can say with St. Paul, 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me'—words that manifestly describe a deliverance from inward as well as from outward sin. This is expressed both negatively, 'I live not'—my evil nature, the body of sin, is destroyed—and positively, 'Christ liveth in me'—and therefore all that is holy, and just, and good. Indeed both these, 'Christ liveth in me,' and 'I live not,' are inseparably connected; for 'what communion hath light with darkness' or 'Christ with Belial?'

26. He therefore who liveth in true believers hath 'purified their hearts by

faith', insomuch that 'everyone that hath Christ in him, the hope of glory', 'purifieth himself even as he is pure' (1 John 3:3). He is purified from pride; for Christ was lowly of heart. He is pure from self-will or desire; for Christ desired only to do the will of his Father, and to finish his work. And he is pure from anger, in the common sense of the word; for Christ was meek and gentle, patient and long-suffering. I say, 'in the common sense of the word'; for all anger is not evil. We read of our Lord himself that he once 'looked round with anger' (Mark 3:5). But with what kind of anger? The next word shows, συλλυπούμενος, being at the same time 'grieved for the hardness of their hearts'. So then he was angry at the sin, and in the same moment grieved for the sinners; angry or displeased at the offence, but sorry for the offenders. With anger, yea, hatred, he looked upon the thing; with grief and love upon the persons. Go thou that art perfect, and do likewise. 'Be thus angry, and thou sinnest not': feeling a displacency at every offence against God, but only love and tender compassion to the offender.

27. Thus doth Jesus 'save his people from their sins': and not only from outward sins, but also from the sins of their hearts; from evil thoughts and from evil tempers. 'True', say some, 'we shall thus be saved from our sins, but not till death; not in this world.' But how are we to reconcile this with the express words of St. John? 'Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world' (1 John 4:17). The Apostle here beyond all contradiction speaks of himself and other living Christians, of whom (as though he had foreseen this very evasion, and set himself to overturn it from the foundation) he flatly affirms that not only at or after death but 'in this world' they are as their Master.

28. Exactly agreeable to this are his words in the first chapter of this Epistle: 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.' And again, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:5, etc.). Now it is evident the Apostle here also speaks of a deliverance wrought 'in this world'. For he saith not, 'the blood of Christ will cleanse' (at the hour of death, or in the day of judgment) but it 'cleanseth (at the time present) us (living Christians) from all sin.' And it is equally evident that if any sin remain we are not cleansed from all sin: if any unrighteousness remain in the soul it is not cleansed from all unrighteousness. Neither let any sinner against his own soul say that this relates to justification only, or the cleansing us from the guilt of sin. First, because this is confounding together what the Apostle clearly distinguishes, who mentions first, 'to forgive us our sins', and then 'to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. Secondly, because this is asserting justification by works in the strongest sense possible. It is making all inward as well as outward holiness necessarily previous to justification. For

if the cleansing here spoken of is no other than the cleansing us from the guilt of sin, then we are not cleansed from guilt; i.e. are not justified, unless on condition of 'walking in the light, as he is in the light'. It remains, then, that Christians are saved in this world from all sin, from all unrighteousness; that they are now in such a sense perfect as not to commit sin, and to be freed from evil thoughts and evil tempers.

29. Thus hath the Lord fulfilled the things he spake by his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: by Moses in particular, saying, 'I will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul' (Deut. 30:6); by David, crying out, 'Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me'; and most remarkably by Ezekiel, in those words: 'Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean; from all *your* filthiness, and from *all* your idols will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. . . . Ye shall be my people, and I will be your God. I will also save you from all your uncleannesses. . . . Thus saith the Lord your God, In the day that I shall have cleansed you from all your iniquities . . . the heathen shall know that I the Lord build the ruined places; . . . I the Lord have spoken it, . . . and I will do it' (Ezek. 36:25, etc.).

30. 'Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved', both in the law and in the prophets, and having the prophetic word confirmed unto us in the gospel by our blessed Lord and his apostles, 'let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.' 'Let us fear lest' so many promises 'being made us of entering into his rest' (which he that hath entered into 'is ceased from his own works') 'any of us should come short of it.' 'This one thing let us do: forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, let us press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'; crying unto him day and night till we also are 'delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the sons of God.'

'AWAKE, THOU THAT SLEEPEST'

Sermon 3 – 1742

AN INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

Charles Wesley's evangelical conversion had preceded his brother's by three days. The following year, in July 1739, Charles preached a sermon on justification before the university at Christ Church 'with great boldness'. In June 1740 he had spent a week in Oxford 'preaching repentance' but discovered that 'learned Gallio cared for none of these things', comparing the indifference of the Roman consul in Acts 18:17 with that of the university. He came up for appointment as university preacher in St. Mary's on April 4, 1742, his first and last occasion for preaching there.

Charles's message, with a barrage of invidious questions for its climax, most likely would have aroused some resentment in his auditory, though Thomas Salmon (a historian who was in the audience) reported that his accusations fell largely on deaf ears. In any case, this sermon would have persuaded any Methodist reader of Charles's wholehearted identification with his brother's cause and theirs. This sermon is then a lively evangelical statement, giving Charles's personal identification with the Revival, and his valedictory to Oxford.

Charles interprets the sleep mentioned in the text as signifying 'the natural state of man': 'that deep sleep of the soul into which the sin of Adam hath cast all who spring from his loins'. Bereft of spiritual senses, the sleeper is called by God to know his true state and repent. Charles does not shy away from the doctrines of assurance or perceptible inspiration, reiterating a theme typical of early Wesleyan preaching: it is not possible to have received the Spirit of Christ and not know it. Before the decade was out, the Wesleys would retreat from the stark either/or implications of this stance, but would continue to hold that the indwelling of the Spirit is the commonly expected privilege of all believers.

The title of this sermon as published was *A Sermon preached on Sunday, April 4, 1742, before the University of Oxford. By Charles Wesley, M.A., Student of Christ Church.* The drop-title prefixed to the individual editions of the sermon was simply 'Ephes. v.14'; some variant of this heading continued in all subsequent editions until 1795, when its present title appeared for the first time.