



wisconsin conference  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

# A STEWARDSHIP DEVOTIONAL

*Based on the Sermons  
of John Wesley*



Think  
**Greater**

*The purpose of these brief meditations on selected sermons of John Wesley is to give members of the Wisconsin Annual Conference a glimpse of our rich theological heritage as United Methodists as it applies to the topics discussed in the “Think Greater” Stewardship Campaign.*

*While John Wesley was a practical and not a systematic theologian (which means his ideas are not always clearly defined and do not always hang together well as he was much more interested in living the Christian life than in thinking about it), he nevertheless had a powerful and penetrating mind full of insights applicable to every generation of Christians. Some of them are collected here for your enjoyment and reflection and, of course, because they are from Wesley, for your use. All sermon quotations are taken from John Wesley’s Forty-Four Sermons, a series of sermons Wesley chose as covering the main tenets of his teaching and preaching.*

# Think Greater Living

## WEEK 1: LIVE ENTHUSIASTICALLY

**Wesley Sermons:** *The Marks of the New Birth (Sermon 14) and The Witness of the Spirit (Sermon 10)*

### Day 1: Read John 3:1-10

*“So is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).*

John Wesley chooses a verse from the famous encounter between Jesus and the Nicodemus as his text for a sermon called “Marks of the New Birth.” He points out that the Scripture does not specify what is meant by being born again, so a Christian must think it through for herself or himself. Nothing could be more important than this, as without the new birth one cannot see the kingdom of God. This would be as bad, spiritually speaking, as not seeing the world because you stayed in the womb. Not to see the kingdom of God would be to miss the very thing God made you for. So nothing could be more important than to learn, in detail, what it means to be born anew, to be born of the Spirit—or, as we are putting it this week, to live enthusiastically—in order that you might seek it.

**Prayer:** *I thank Thee, O God, because I know that religion does not mean melancholy and moroseness . . . When I am peevish and morose, it is not because of religion, but of my want of it (Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles).*

### Day 2: Read John 3:1-10

*“The first [mark of the new birth] and the foundation of all the rest, is faith” (The Marks of the New Birth I.1, p. 163).*

Wesley spends more time on this mark than on any of the others in this sermon. Dead faith is intellectual assent to propositions like “Jesus Christ is Lord” or any of the statements of the Apostles’ Creed, for example. It is not a mark of the new birth. Living faith is a God-given disposition of the heart: sure trust in God, and confidence that through the merits of Christ, one’s sins

are forgiven and one is reconciled to God. This inward trust and confidence are so powerful that they have a remarkable outward result: a person with living faith has power over outward sin—power to effectively and consistently resist habits and actions that destroy oneself or one’s relationships. Wesley spills a good deal of ink reflecting on the marvel of this: living faith’s power over outward sin. The other fruit of living faith is peace: “that serenity of soul which it hath not entered into the heart of a natural man to conceive, and which it is not possible for even the spiritual man to utter” (I.7, p. 166). The ineffable inward peace of living faith is as unshakable as inward trust in God. Unshakable trust, unshakeable peace, and power over outward sin: one can see why Wesley longed for and sought a living faith for himself and for everyone else.

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### Day 3: Read John 3:1-10

*“A second scriptural mark of those who are born of God, is hope”  
(The Marks of the New Birth II.1, p. 167).*

Wesley spends less time on hope than he does on faith as a mark of new birth; it is also less clear what he means by it. He contrasts dead and living hope as he contrasted dead and living faith, but it is much harder to tell what dead hope is than what dead faith is. Dead hope is evidently hope for things one should not have, hope for things that encourage vice, as Wesley calls dead hope “the offspring of pride” and “the parent of every evil word and work.” Perhaps one learns best what dead hope is, however, by what it lacks: joy. Dead hope is hope without joy. Living hope is tied to joy as firmly as living faith was tied to peace. In the section of Marks of the New Birth devoted to hope, Wesley turns ecstatic, blurting out “joy” or “rejoicing” nine times in just one paragraph (II.5, p. 168). There can be no doubt that living hope is joyful hope, inextricably woven into enthusiastic living.

**Prayer:** *I thank Thee, O God, because I know that religion does not mean melancholy and moroseness . . . When I am peevish and morose, it is not because of religion, but of my want of it. (Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles).*

### Day 4: Read John 3:1-10

*“A third scriptural mark of those who are born of God, and the greatest of all, is love, even ‘the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto them’ (Romans 5:5)” (The Marks of the New Birth III.1, p. 169).*

Though Wesley gives more space to the exposition of faith than to love in this sermon, he, like Paul from whom he gets the idea, regards love as greater than faith, as will become clear in other sermons devoted entirely to love. One cannot read any of Wesley's works long without encountering the phrase "the love of God shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Ghost" like seed broadcast in a field where it grows to bear fruit thirty-, and sixty-, and a hundredfold. The love of God is first of all a love for God that leads—even compels—those who possess it to cry out "Abba, Father!" as Jesus did. The lovers of God in Wesley's world love Christ with equal ecstasy; they enjoy the mystical union with Christ that is the subject of the love poems in the Song of Solomon for Christian theologians, love that drives the soul to exclaim "my beloved is mine and I am his." And after the love of God is love for God, it is also love for neighbor—love equally unreserved, "hungering and thirsting to do good of every possible kind unto all men . . . rejoicing to spend and be spent for them" (III.5, p. 171). It is difficult to imagine a lustier engagement with life than that described by Wesley as belonging to the one who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart.

**Prayer:** *I thank Thee, O God, because I know that religion does not mean melancholy and moroseness . . . When I am peevish and morose, it is not because of religion, but of my want of it. (Susanna Wesley, mother of John and Charles).*

## Day 5: Read John 3:1-10

*"The testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my Spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given Himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God" (The Witness of the Spirit I.8, p. 115).*

"The Witness of the Spirit" is a good companion sermon to "Marks of the New Birth" to speak about enthusiastic living in Wesley's thought. Wesley's words in this excerpt recall an experience he had on Aldersgate Street in London, which proved to be his own launch into enthusiastic living. Returning from a prayer meeting at an Aldersgate meeting house where he "felt his heart strangely warmed," he wrote in his journal words much like these in "The Witness of the Spirit": "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." Enthusiastic means "infused with Spirit." Christian enthusiasm is infusion with the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit incarnate in Jesus Christ, let loose at Pentecost to be incarnate in his followers. And essential to the experience of the Holy Spirit (the source of abundant life and joy in living) is knowledge of the love of Christ for one personally, knowledge of forgiveness, and knowledge of reconciliation with God.

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### Day 6: Read John 3:1-10

*“As to the witness of our Spirit: the soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves and delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or not” (The Witness of the Spirit I.11, p. 116).*

As in his accolades on living hope, Wesley’s focus here is on delight and rejoicing—this time as the inevitable companions of the Holy Spirit’s testimony in the depths of one’s heart that one is a child of God. Delight and rejoicing are endemic to enthusiastic living and greatly longed for by all people. Though Wesley is often depicted as quite a dour man—with cause, if you select his most gloomy or accusatory statements—he is as capable of rapturous reveries on delight and rejoicing as any theologian who ever lived. United Methodists today can still find resources to stay with the rigors of the Christian life in the writings of our founder who never ceased to praise the joy that went with them.

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### Day 7: Read John 3:1-10

*“The question is not, what you was made in baptism (do not evade); but what are you now?” (Marks of the New Birth IV.2, p. 172).*

In Wesley’s view new birth, or enthusiastic living, cannot be a past, but only a present experience. Much religious experience gets petrified in the past, like one’s baptism. Wesley wants to prevent this by his question “What are you now?” What is the quality of your faith, hope, and especially your love now? “Marks of the New Birth” ends with quite a fiery tirade against any who believe their baptism guaranteed their salvation absent the new birth. As Wesley stated at the outset, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born of the Spirit, without living faith, living hope, and living love. And nothing is more important than to see the kingdom of God. Unless life in the Spirit is a present reality, it is no reality at all, and Wesley yearned for this glorious life to be a present reality for all.

# Think Greater giving

## WEEK 2: GIVE WHOLEHEARTEDLY

**Wesley Sermon:** *The Use of Money (Sermon 44)*

### Day 1: Read Luke 16:1-13

*“I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations” (Luke 16:9).*

To summarize his thoughts on Christian stewardship, John Wesley chooses verse 9 of Jesus’ strange parable of the dishonest manager (“make yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness”) instead of verse 13 (“you cannot serve God and money”), which seems so much more fitting to the subject. The reason he gives for doing this is intriguing: worldly people, Wesley says, discuss money a lot, but Christians hardly at all. Christians should learn from the world on this point. (*The Use of Money*, Introduction.2, p. 577). Money, Wesley says, is too important an instrument for good to be used haphazardly by people whose calling it is to do what is good. Wesley believed that the introduction of money into the world, far from being an evil, is an example of the providence of God. Some Christians have gotten the mistaken idea that money corrupts people, but this is not the case. Money is not responsible for the corruption of people; rather, people are responsible for the corruption of money. Money can be used badly, but it can also be used well. When used well it is of unspeakable use to civilization, transacting business and for Christians, doing all manner of good.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

## Day 2: Read Luke 16:1-13

*“[Because money is an instrument of doing good], it is of the highest concern, that all who fear God know how to employ this valuable talent; that they be instructed how it may answer these glorious ends, and in the highest degree”* (*The Use of Money, Introduction.3, p. 578*).

Some examples of “glorious ends” for which money can be used are buying food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the naked, shelter for the stranger, support to widow and orphan, defense for the oppressed, and relief of pain for the sick. Since these ends are so good, Wesley points out, it is important for Christians to know how to attain them in the highest degree that money can buy. Their ardor in using money well is an eminently practical expression of their ardor, or desire for God.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it* (John Wesley).

## Day 3: Read Luke 16:1-13

*“The first [plain rule] for the use of money is ‘Gain all you can’* (*The Use of Money I.1, p. 579*).

Because money can be used for good, the more money you have, the more good you can do. Hence Wesley’s famous first rule for the use of money: gain all you can. “Gain all you can” has restrictions, however, in Wesley’s view, all having to do with not spending more of yourself for money than it is worth. Some of these restrictions are: (1) Jobs that require labor that destroy one’s physical health (e.g., breathing air tainted with streams of melting lead); (2) Jobs that deprive you of appropriate time for food and sleep; (3) Jobs that destroy your mental or spiritual health (e.g., jobs contrary to the known law of God or the country, jobs that require you to cheat or lie to fulfill their requirements, and jobs that require you to “conform to a custom” that offends your conscience); (4) Jobs that hurt your neighbor by exploiting property (e.g., taking unlawful interest, gambling or pawnbroking, or selling your own goods below market price to gain competitive advantage); (5) Jobs that hurt your neighbor’s health (e.g., selling liquor for non-medicinal use or prolonging a disease to make more money from it); (6) Jobs that hurt your neighbor’s soul (e.g., encouraging “unchastity or intemperance”—presumably running brothels or bars).

Wesley's real rule was "Gain all you can, so long as you gain it at a job that benefits human beings." If you can't name how your job benefits human souls, Wesley would say learn how to name it or leave the job. With this restriction, Wesley was a champion of the Protestant work ethic, urging Methodists to work hard—diligently and persistently without wasting time—and to work smart, using the brains God gave them to do their jobs better today than they did them yesterday. He urged them to these virtues so that they could gain all they could rather than less than all they could.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

#### Day 4: Read Luke 16:1-13

*"The second rule of Christian prudence is 'Save all you can'  
(The Use of Money, ll.1, p. 583).*

Learning to earn was not enough for Wesley. Getting money was only the first step in using money well. In order to have money to spend on the good causes he mentions at the outset of his sermon, you also had to save it from unworthy causes. To help Methodists save, Wesley gave three guidelines: (1) Refrain from purchases that merely gratify a physical craving ("the desire of the flesh" in the phrasing of 1 John 2:16), like "delicacy and variety" in food. Plain food is good enough, and saves money. (2) Refrain from purchases that merely please the eye with no practical purpose ("the desire of the eye"). His examples are expensive clothes, costly furniture, paintings, gilding, books or other "needless ornaments" that have no utility. To buy "dress up" for everyday objects cut into saving. (3) Refrain from purchases that merely gain admiration and praise from your neighbors, showing off your wealth and showing that you have successfully competed with your neighbors in the "stuff" race ("the pride of life"). Superfluous possessions don't just gratify physical desires; they gratify vanity, too. And most important, buying stuff to "keep up with the Joneses" cuts into saving.

Wesley extended his advice on saving to a sensitive area, still a cause of raging debate: what one spends on one's children. To indulge children with things they do not need cuts into saving, he said. But worse, it aggravates "the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye and the pride of life" in them, which is a disservice to them, hurting their souls and crippling their ability to manage money well themselves. The "soul damage" of overindulgence is a lesson still useful today.

The rigorous discipline required to apply Wesley's second rule for using money well can make understandable the charge that Methodists had no fun, but there could never be weight in the charge that they could not save! It would be a rare person who could not save more than he or she currently does if Wesley's high standard were applied today.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

## Day 5: Read Luke 16:1-13

*“Having, first, gained all you can, and, secondly, saved all you can, then ‘give all you can’” (The Use of Money III.1, p. 586).*

For John Wesley, neither gaining money nor saving money were ends in themselves. Both were means to the end of giving money away. For Wesley, unless one uses the money one has saved, one might as well throw it into the sea; and “use” in Wesley's view almost always means “give.” Giving is what should happen to all money after providing for one's own and one's family's food, clothing, and shelter, and “whatever nature moderately requires for preserving the body in health and strength” (Use of Money III.3, p. 586). Anything left over should be used to do good first for the members of the household of faith, and then to all people in general.

Wesley wanted to include meeting personal needs in good stewardship of the money that belongs ultimately to God. He would never recommend starving yourself or your children to feed someone else's. The great challenge in applying Wesley's rules is in determining what you and your household need and what you don't need. This is a question he tackles at the end of his sermon, touched in tomorrow's meditation.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

## Day 6: Read Luke 16:1-13

*“If, then, a doubt should at any time arise in your mind concerning what you are going to expend, either on yourself or any part of your family, you have an easy way to remove it” (The Use of Money, III.4, pp. 586–7).*

Wesley developed four tests to apply in deciding whether or not to spend money on yourself or your household, or to spend it instead on doing good to the church or to humankind in general. First, ask, “In spending this money (on myself or my family) am I acting as a steward or as an owner of it?” This test forces one to ask whether or not God (the real owner of the money) would want me or my family member to have the thing in question. It also forces the further questions—“If so, why? If not, why not?”—that very often will, when answered, clinch a decision on whether or not to make a purchase. Second, ask, “In what scripture does God require me to make this expenditure?”

Outlays for oneself or one’s family must be made in obedience to the Word of God. Knowing whether or not one is doing this requires extensive knowledge of Scripture, which is why “Know Your Bible” is the most important maxim of Methodist and, truly, of all Christian stewardship. Third, ask, “Can I offer this expenditure as a sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ?” Does this expense forward the work of Jesus Christ on earth? If you can’t name how it does, don’t spend the money. Fourth, ask, “Have I reason to believe that for this expenditure I will have a reward at the resurrection of the just?” Will I be glad at the end of my life that I made this expenditure? Is it one I want to be remembered for? Stephen Covey in his popular book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989), summed up Wesley’s last test with the maxim, “Begin with the end in mind.” “The end” was the end of one’s life.

Wesley believed that the thorough application of these four tests would lead a Methodist to a good decision about whether or not to make a purchase almost all the time. However, if rational deliberation on these four questions did not give one a yes or no answer on a particular expenditure, Wesley recommended prayer over the same four questions. He was convinced God would never fail to answer someone who persistently asked God’s help in a decision about money.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

*“In order to see the ground and reason of this [gain, save, give all you can], consider, when the Possessor of heaven and earth brought you into being, and placed you in this world, He placed you here, not as a proprietor, but a steward: as such He entrusted you, for a season, with goods of various kinds; but the sole property of these still rests in Him, nor can ever be alienated from Him” (The Use of Money III.2, p. 586).*

At the end of his sermon, Wesley justifies his three rules for the use of money on the principle of all Christian stewardship: everything we possess belongs to God; we just manage it. Not only money and possessions, but body and soul belong to God and can be recalled by God at any time. Wesley extends the principle of stewardship to its logical extreme: the use of body and soul as well as substance must be “a holy sacrifice acceptable to God” through Jesus Christ. *The Use of Money* is Wesley’s attempt to define “holy sacrifice” as it applies to money so that the principle of “holy sacrifice” can be of some practical use. He keeps ever in the mind the effects decisions about money have on human souls, both good and bad. The vices to be resisted in learning the right use of money—sloth (which erodes “earn all you can”), waste (which erodes “save all you can”) and covetousness (which erodes “give all you can”)—seem to degrade what Wesley regards as human dignity in the stewardship of God’s property. To conquer these vices and master their opposites are an important part of what Wesley believes it takes to be a fully human being.

**Prayer:** *Set a watch, O Lord, over my senses and appetites, my passions and understanding, that I may resolutely deny them every gratification which has no tendency to thy glory. Oh, train me up in this good way that, when I am old, I may not depart from it (John Wesley).*

# Think Greater *Loving*

## WEEK 3: LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY

**Wesley Sermon:** *Catholic Spirit (Sermon 34)*

### Day 1: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“And when he [Jehu] was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him, and he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered: It is. If it be, give me thine hand” (2 Kings 10:15).*

This incident from 2 Kings in which Jehu meets Jehonadab is an odd story to make Wesley’s “top 44,” a scriptural basis for his most important teaching. The incident is unfamiliar to most Christians today—and for good reason. It is part of a gruesomely violent narrative. Jehu, a military commander anointed king of Israel by command of the prophet Elisha, is in the middle of a killing spree when he meets Jehonadab. He is cementing his position as king in a coup d’état, having just murdered King Ahab’s reigning son Joram, Ahab’s wife Jezebel, and (with the collusion of Samaria’s frightened elder statesmen) all of Ahab’s other sons. He is convinced that in doing this he is doing the will of God, purging Israel from the influence of pagan Canaanites. Jehonadab is a member of a fanatical sect of nomads who shares Jehu’s zeal for the utter destruction of every trace of Baal worship in Israel, including the destruction of the people who practiced it. In “Catholic Spirit,” Wesley morphs unconditional zeal into unconditional love. It may seem shocking to us that this “man of one book” who was so devoted to scriptural authority could twist the original meaning of the text as much as he does in this sermon. But it is impossible to overestimate the effect Wesley’s experience of the transforming love of Christ had on his reading of all the rest of Scripture.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

## Day 2: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“Though we may not think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein [in love] all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences” (Catholic Spirit Introduction.4, pp. 443–4).*

The “opinions” Wesley is talking about are theological opinions within the Christian faith, some of them based on irreconcilable premises. He also has different modes of Christian worship in mind. He did not intend his famous thought, “Though we may not think alike, may we not love alike?” to extend to members of other faiths or no faith at all, issues that exercise United Methodists today. Given enough careful theological thought, one could extend Wesley’s idea of the unifying power of love in these directions without betraying Wesley’s spirit. But because Wesley wanted to specify “love” as a Christian ideal defined in Christian terms, he makes this restriction, intending his sermon to be useful to Christians in dealing with one another. That would be usefulness enough.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

## Day 3: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“But what is properly implied in the question [i.e. Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?]. . . . The first thing implied is this: Is thy heart right with God?” (Catholic Spirit I.12, p. 447).*

For Wesley, unconditional love for people, the problem he sets for himself at the beginning of the sermon, depends on unconditional love for God. As he so often does, he helps his readers understand what he means by big ideas by breaking this one—the love of God—into constituent parts. The love of God has three parts, which must all be present at the same time to deserve the name of “love.” These are 1) beliefs about God (intellectual assent to God’s reality and perfections like eternity, immensity, wisdom and power); 2) trust in God as the only source of happiness, joy, peace and meaning that can finally satisfy the immensity of a human soul; and 3) service to God, making one’s “meat and drink” to do the will of God, as Jesus did. The idea that power to love people unconditionally comes from God and that God can give this power only to those who already love him unconditionally is fundamental to grasping the meaning of “Catholic Spirit.” Limits on our love for God will also limit the love we are able to give to people.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

#### Day 4: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“Dost thou believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, ‘God over all, blessed for ever’? . . . Does He dwell in thee and thou in him?” (Catholic Spirit I.13, p. 448).*

Unconditional love of God depends, in its turn, on the work of Jesus Christ in the human heart. Wesley cannot conceive of loving either God or people unconditionally without also believing and dwelling in Christ. This unshakeable conviction is the key to Wesley’s change of zeal into love in his reading of 2 Kings. Jesus’ way and work on earth are the incarnation of the power to love without limit that, for a Christian, cannot be replicated or replaced by anyone or anything else. Christian love, and any particular Christian’s love, is the love of Jesus given by Jesus through the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ Spirit, on earth.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

#### Day 5: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“Is thy heart right toward thy neighbor? Dost thou love as thyself, all mankind, without exception?” (Catholic Spirit I.17, p. 449).*

The unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ gives a person power for unconditional love of neighbor. When Wesley turns in “Catholic Spirit” to the question of what unconditional love of neighbor really is, he becomes more expansive in his thinking; he makes no restrictions on “neighbor” by time, space, or faith. Here Wesley uses Jesus’ definition of neighbor in the Bible, not the much narrower definition he used at the beginning of the sermon, meaning members of different Christian denominations. Some questions Wesley gives his readers to test the quality of their “neighbor love” are these: “Do you ‘love your enemies’? . . . Do you love even the enemies of God, the unthankful and unholy? . . . Do your bowels yearn over them? . . . Do you show your love by your works? . . . Do you do them all the good you can; endeavouring to supply all their wants; assisting them both in body and soul, to the uttermost of your power?” (I.17, 18, p. 449). Wesley sets a very high standard for answering yes to the query “Is thine heart right?” when it comes to other human beings. The impossibility of reaching the standard without the assistance of the indwelling love of Christ is clear.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

## Day 6: Read 2 Kings 10:15-17

*“If it be, give me thy hand.’ I do not mean, ‘Be of my opinion.’ . . . Let all opinions alone on one side and the other: only ‘give me thine hand’” (Catholic Spirit II.1, p. 450).*

Wesley’s focus as he begins to dissect the big idea of neighbor love is on “me” in the phrase “give me thy hand.” He suggests that a person serious about unconditional love begin with the person in front of him or her right now. His examples of loving me—the person present at the moment—are stunningly concrete: love me in particular, not as a nameless member of the human race; love me by being tender toward my particular ignorance or annoying habit, thus not increasing the burden of them for me; love me by not envying my victories; love me by never revealing my faults to others and by being willing to put the best possible construction on my words and actions rather than the worst (see II.3,4, p. 451). Love for any person is something physical and concrete, not something ethereal and vague. Neighbors are always loved in particular, never in general. Few lessons can be more useful in modern times when so many relationships have gone “virtual” and generic.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

*“But while he is steadily fixed in his religious principles, in what he believes to be the truth as it is in Jesus; while he firmly adheres to that worship of God which he judges to be most acceptable in His sight; and while he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation—his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit. For love alone gives the title to this character: catholic love is catholic spirit” (Catholic Spirit III.4, p. 454).*

Wesley summarizes his sermon, written in a period of intense conflict between the Methodists and the Church of England, as well as of more general conflict among Christian sects, with these words. The point we can still take from this remarkable work is that catholic spirit can never exist in the realm of ideas: diversity or tolerance as abstract ideals. Neither can it exist in the realm of zeal—ruthless devotion to an ideal that tolerates no dissent. Catholic spirit can exist only in love—and a concrete, practical love at that—grounded in and dependent on the love of God in Jesus Christ.

**Prayer:** *Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal (John Wesley).*

# Think Greater



## WEEK 4: BEYOND ALL EXPECTATION

**Wesley Sermon:** *Means of Grace (Sermon 12)*

### Day 1: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“Ye are gone away from Mine ordinances, and have not kept them”  
(Malachi 3:7).*

Wesley chooses a text for his sermon on the means of grace that refers to Torah, the Jewish law. He uses the text to plead for the religious practices of Christianity that cannot be codified as a law. As with Torah, however, these practices can bind those who obey them to God because God chooses to be present in them. Neglecting Torah had led to the moral impotence of Israel that Malachi decries; neglecting the means of grace will, Wesley believes, have a similar effect. The means of grace are the ordinary ways God communicates with us; attending them is the simplest, most effective thing a Christian can do to train and increase his or her desire for God and love for people. And whether or not to attend is, unlike most things in life, within human control.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

## Day 2: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“The whole body of Christians [is] agreed that Christ ordained certain outward means for conveying His grace into the souls of men. Their constant practice set this beyond all dispute; for so long as ‘all that believed were together, and had all things common’ (Acts 2:44), ‘They continued steadfastly in the teaching of the Apostles, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (verse 42)” (Means of Grace I.1, p. 134).*

Here, Wesley confines the means of grace he believes to be essential for Christians to those he believes were established by Christ and practiced by Christians from the beginning. These means are prayer, searching the scriptures, and the Lord’s Supper, the acts that occupied the primitive church described in Acts. Wesley repeats again and again the truth that by themselves the means of grace are mechanical exercises that have no intrinsic spiritual power or merit in them. They function a bit like scales in learning to play the piano: the scales are dull and repetitive, but real music flows through your fingers only after you have mastered them.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

## Day 3: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby He might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace” (Means of Grace II.1, p. 136).*

Wesley’s thought and writing are saturated with grace. He developed a sophisticated vocabulary for describing the grace of God, which he summarizes here in the middle of his sermon in the means of grace. Grace takes three basic forms with three basic functions in transforming human life. “Preventing grace” (usually called “prevenient grace” in confirmation classes) is nearly synonymous with providence, God’s sustaining care for the world God made and loves, shown, say, in the rain that falls on the just and the unjust alike. Preventing means, literally, “going before”. Preventing grace is any sheltering mercy in nature or in human love that keeps you alive and comes to you before you are even aware of a God of grace, or even of a God at all.

“Justifying grace” is the gift of faith in Christ that lodges in human conviction of sin and yearning to be free of it and in God’s assurance that sin is forgiven in Christ; justifying grace makes a human being a new creation, reconciled to God.

“Sanctifying grace” works in the justified to make them holy, ever more nearly conformed to Christ. It was belief in sanctifying grace that made Wesley also believe that a Christian could “go on to perfection” (meaning perfection in love like Christ’s) because there is no natural limit to our power to love that is greater than God’s power to exceed that limit through grace. All the “means of grace” are useless except as tools to carve out channels in our souls through which grace in all its forms can flow and be sharpened in our consciousness.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

#### Day 4: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“First, all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in the way of prayer”  
(Means of Grace III.1, p. 139).*

Wesley refers to Christ’s extensive teaching on prayer to justify prayer as the first, and primary, means of grace. Jesus directs his disciples to ask God for what they want (Matthew 7:7-8) and to ask for it without ceasing (Luke 11; 18). Wesley directs the Methodists, in following the Lord’s teaching, to ask for grace—especially if they feel they have not received it—and to ask without ceasing. He is convinced God will not withhold grace in any of its forms, because God knows how to give good gifts to God’s children and grace is the best gift of all. God, Wesley thought, would have to wait much longer for someone to desire grace than a person who desires grace with an undivided heart would have to wait for God to give it.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy*

*temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

### Day 5: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“Secondly, all who desire the grace of God are to wait for it in searching the Scriptures” (Means of Grace III.7, p. 141).*

Wesley had much slighter evidence that Christ commanded searching the Scriptures than he did that Christ commanded prayer. He refers only to one verse in John in which Jesus says “Search the scriptures for they testify of me” (John 5:39). However, Jesus was clearly familiar with the Scriptures himself, and the earliest Christians clearly studied the Scriptures Jesus knew—the Hebrew Bible—looking for evidence in them that Jesus was the Messiah and being satisfied with what they found. So Wesley is on solid ground in naming “searching the Scriptures” as a means of grace. He names three ways to do this: hearing scripture (as in listening to sermons), reading it, and meditating on it. While we do not know exactly how Wesley searched the Scriptures himself, memorization of vast numbers of verses was one of the results. He can hardly utter a sentence without an allusion to or turn of phrase taken from Scripture; the language of Scripture became his own language.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

### Day 6: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*“Thirdly, all who desire an increase of the grace of God are to wait for it in partaking of the Lord’s supper; for this also is a direction Himself hath given” (Means of Grace III.11, p. 143).*

It is easy to see that Jesus instituted and commanded the continuation of the Lord’s Supper. It is the key ritual that distinguishes Christianity from the Judaism out of which it arose and can be traced nowhere but to Jesus himself. Wesley believed that anyone who truly desired the grace of God needed to come to the Lord’s Supper, and to come often. The most important reason for this, he said, was that the Lord’s Supper trains and increases one’s desire “to be made conformable to the death of Christ” (III.11, p. 144). He urged every

Christian to examine the state of his or her desire to conform to the death of Christ each time he or she came to the table. It is almost certainly safe to say that desire to conform to the death of Christ is not foremost in the mind of most United Methodists today when we come to the table, as our thought (and liturgy) has moved away from crucifixion and death toward resurrection and life when the Lord's Supper is celebrated. This move is mostly a good thing; eating together is a much better symbol of abundant life than of abundant death. But suffering, submission, and obedience unto death, even death on a cross, are also part of the experience of a person who goes all the way with Christ. This part of Christian experience is more likely to be lost in an era of prosperity and ease like our own; Wesley's advice is timely again.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*

### Day 7: Read Malachi 3:1-7

*"I will believe, that whatever God hath promised, he is faithful also to perform. And seeing He hath promised to bless me in this way [through the means of grace], I trust it shall be according to His word" (Means of Grace IV.1, p. 145).*

Wesley directs the Methodists to "wait for grace" while you attend the means of grace. His instructions on how to wait are useful to us still today. First, he says, retain a lively sense that God is above all the means of grace; God is not bound to use prayer, the searching of Scripture or the Lord's Supper to confer grace, and is free to come in any other way God chooses. Second, before you use any of the means of grace, remember that there is no power or merit in them per se. The means of grace can't save you; they can't even help to save you. Only God can save you. Finally, in using the means of grace, seek God alone—not pleasure, entertainment, or comfort—God alone. These other lesser goods might come to you or they might not. But whether or not they come, they are not your goal; your goal is to wait for God alone. Wesley thought that while you cannot control God, you can control yourself; you can choose to attend the means of grace or not to attend them. Grace comes in the time and way chosen by God, but grace is most likely to come and to abound where fertile soil can receive it. To attend the means of grace with the attitudes Wesley describes is to fertilize the soil of your soul. Millions still testify to the marvels God grows there.

**Prayer:** *I humbly and heartily thank Thee for all the favors Thou hast bestowed on me: for creating me after Thine own image, for daily preserving me by Thy good providence, for redeeming me by the death of Thy blessed Son, and for the assistance of Thy Holy Spirit; for causing me to be born in a Christian country, for blessing me with plentiful means of salvation, with religious parents and friends, and frequent returns of thy ever blessed sacrament. I also thank Thee for Thy temporal blessings; for the preservation of me this night, for my health, strength, food, raiment, and all the other comforts and necessities of life (John Wesley).*



## Notes

Sermon Quotations: All sermon quotations are taken from *John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons* (London: Epworth Press, 1977), a series of sermons Wesley chose as covering the main tenets of his teaching and preaching.

Scripture Text: All Scripture text is from the King James, or Authorized, Version of the Bible, as edited and adapted by John Wesley.

Prayer for Week 1: Susanna Wesley, *A Wesley Family Book of Days*, compiled and edited by Susan Pellowe (Chicago: Renard Productions, 2002), entry for December 6.

Prayer for Week 2: John Wesley, *A Wesley Family Book of Days*, entry for January 19.

Prayer for Week 3: "A Covenant Prayer in the Style of John Wesley," *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 291.

Prayer for Week 4: John Wesley, *A Wesley Family Book of Days*, entry for June 21.

Devotional prepared by the Rev. Barb Cook.