

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series***“Persevering to the End”***[Matthew 5:10-12](#)

For the past 5 weeks, we have looked at John Wesley’s birth and family upbringing, education and teaching career, ministry in America and back in England. And over the last two Sundays, we learned about the Methodist heritage as we examined Wesley’s understanding of God’s grace and his teaching on works of piety and mercy. Today, we wrap up our sermon series called *Revival* by looking at the opposition Wesley faced and the perseverance he had throughout his life.

John Wesley started his career as a professor at Oxford University. Once he was ordained in the Church of England, he began to preach, and his life was devoted to preaching, as he led a church revival movement. As we have learned, Wesley preached 40,000 sermons, often preaching 4-5 times a day, and traveled 250,000 miles on foot, horseback and by carriage all over Britain. And, his sermons were frequently published. However, John Wesley was not recognized as the most eloquent preacher of his day, and this was perhaps for two reasons.

First, his messages were rather simple and straightforward. About his sermons, the Oxford-educated priest and deep thinking theologian said, “I design plain truth for plain people. I labor to avoid all words which are not easy to be understood, all which are not used in common life.” Actually, he even read his written sermons to his maid and edited any word or concept that she could not understand.

Second, Wesley’s sermons were too unnerving to many of his hearers. Wesley felt that most Christians and churches were in a state of spiritual sleep. He said that many who claimed to be Christians were only half Christians or just almost Christians. And, he challenged them to a deeper level of faith and more serious commitment to personal and social holiness. His words were convicting and sometimes even condemning. Many of his hearers, especially his fellow priests and church leaders were irritated and offended by his evangelical messages. Wesley used to be invited to preach at different churches on Sunday, as his fellow Oxford professors were. But, once he began to preach such challenging messages, one by one, all the churches closed their doors to him. But, they could not stop him from preaching. Finding the church pulpits closed off, Wesley took the message outside, preaching in fields and market places.

At that time in England, every town had a market, and in the middle of it, stood a cross as a visible reminder to merchants that Jesus Christ was watching them as they conducted business. Here is a picture of one such cross that I took during my trip to England last spring. (*Show #28*) As you see, there are stairs at the bottom of the cross. Whenever Wesley went to a town to preach, he would go to the cross in its market. He would stand on the stairs and begin to sing hymns. As people came to hear him sing, he would begin to preach.

As Wesley drew crowds of people in fields and towns, priests and leaders of nearby churches felt threatened. So, they accused Wesley of preaching without authorization and even hired local thugs to sabotage his preaching. Here is an example, as recorded in his diary from August 28, 1748:

At one, I went to the cross in Bolton. There was a vast number of people, but many of them utterly wild. As soon as I began speaking, they began thrusting to and fro, endeavoring to throw me down from the steps on which I stood. They did so once or twice, but I went up again and continued my discourse. They then began to throw stones; at the same time some got upon the cross behind me to push me down.

Did they succeed in stopping Wesley from preaching that day? Of course not! Every time he was down, he got up and resumed his preaching! Growing up, John had learned about perseverance from his father, Reverend Samuel Wesley. As you may remember from the first Sunday of our Revival sermon series, the senior Wesley was never truly welcomed by the church he served at for almost 40 years. Throughout his ministry, he was subjected to all kinds of opposition, including being thrown into jail and having his house set afire by the hands of his own church members! But, he never gave up and continued to preach.

Like his father, John endured all kinds of harassment and attack in the beginning years of the Methodist movement. He was pelted with rotten tomatoes, manure, and stones. He was dragged and beaten with fists. Even homes where he stayed were set on fire! This was his weekly, if not daily, experience for the first 19 years of his outdoor preaching. However, he persevered through the opposition and never wavered in his evangelical effort.

Perseverance. It is a word that perfectly describes the ministry of the first group of American missionaries to Korea. It seemed almost impossible for them to approach the locals whom they encountered when they arrived on what was known as the Hermit Kingdom, a place closed off to foreigners for so long. Here is a portion of a prayer that was written by one of the American missionaries during that difficult period:

Lord, I do not see anything now...
 The only thing I see is stubbornly stained darkness in this land...
 I cannot read the minds of Korean men.
 I don't know when I even can see the faces of Korean women
 as they hide in the covered litter...
 I cannot see the hearts of Korean people.
 I cannot see what we have to do.

But Lord, I will obey and I believe.
 When we humbly obey ourselves, you begin your work.
 And there will be a day when we will be able to see
 what you do through our spiritual eyes.
 "Faith is the reality of things hoped for,
 and evidence of things not seen ..."
 I believe I will be able to see the future faith of Koreans.

Now we seem to be standing on the barren land.
Now, we are called western ghosts...
Now there is no church, no school.
This is a place full of suspicion, despise, and contempt,
But, I believe it will soon be a land of grace.

In the midst of the rejections they experienced by the people whose language they did not even speak, the first American missionaries in the Korean peninsula persevered, and it was through their prayers. As a result, 133 years later, Korea is second to the United States for the number of missionaries scattered around the world. I don't know what would have happened to my home country if the missionaries from America gave up and went back home...

Wesley also persevered through his prayers. Here is a picture of his bedroom. (*show slide #29*) Next to it is a tiny room where Wesley knelt to pray every morning and evening. (*show slide #30*) If you have a chance to go to England, I encourage you to visit Wesley's House in London and pray at the kneeler, as Wesley did. Here is a picture of his study room. (*show slide #31*) This is where he wrote his sermons and kept his diary, recording his daily ministry activities and experiences.

As Wesley unwaveringly continued his preaching throughout England, his church revival movement grew, and the opposition against Wesley's preaching decreased. By 1757, they had mostly stopped. And by his 60's, Wesley became a popular preacher. By his 70's and 80's, he became a nationally well-known figure for his preaching and for his role in the church revival movement. With his brother, Charles, John Wesley became one of the few graduates of Christ Church College at Oxford University, whose names are engraved on the floor of one of the school's buildings. (*show slide #32*) And, his humble sized portrait is hung on the wall of the Great Dining Hall where the movie, Harry Potter was filmed. (*show slide #33*)

The Methodist movement, the great church revival, was possible because Wesley never gave up and persevered. Throughout the many years of opposition, he often turned to the words of Jesus known as the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes found in the Gospel of Matthew. Today's scripture reading was especially comforting to him. Let us hear again the first half of the reading:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:10-11)

It is natural for us to want to quit when we face criticism and opposition while leading others. A couple of weeks ago, I shared a story of Mr. Leland, a member of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Ohio, who, at the age of 93, was still making an effort to bring people to Christ every day. When the church's lead pastor, Rev Michael Slaughter, was sent there several decades ago, it was a congregation of less than 100 people in a small rural town. Then, he lost two thirds of his members because of the major changes he led. Can you imagine the depth of his disappointment and fear? I am sure he considered an appointment change request to his bishop. But, he did not give up and persevered. Now, his church is one of the

leading churches in our denomination with 5,000 plus worshipers every week. People who change the world are those who refuse to give up in the midst of opposition and persevere to the end with God's help.

As the opposition diminished and the Methodist movement grew, no one would have blamed Wesley if he slowed down and relaxed, and began to enjoy the fruits of his ministry. But, it was not what he did. In his late 60's, Wesley began to speak out against the slave trade of his country. At the age of 84, he published an article on the issue of slavery. And, at the age of 85, he preached a sermon against slavery in his church. He recorded in his journal what happened in his congregation that day. A fight broke out between those who were in favor of slavery and those who were not, and the pews were broken during their physical altercation! And yet, Wesley continued to speak out against slavery.

Wesley never did retire from ministry. He continued to preach almost to the end of his life. When he died at the age of 87, he was surrounded by his friends. According to his friend and housekeeper who recorded Wesley's final moments, Wesley gathered his strength and said, "The best of all, God is with us." Just before he died, he tried to sing Isaac Watts' hymn, "I'll praise My Maker While I've Breath." But, all he could say before his last breath was "I'll praise... I'll praise."

After Wesley's death, the church revival movement that he started continued to spread across America and other parts of the world, in Europe, Asia, Africa, South America, North America, and Australia. And, it is still spreading and growing

The faith Wesley lived was grounded in God's grace - prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. The Christian living Wesley modeled engaged both works of piety and works of mercy. The revival Wesley led was only possible as he completely surrendered his life to God and persevered to the end. As we too seek a revival in our hearts and in the life of our church, I invite you to join me in praying one of the prayers John Wesley prayed:

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,
Exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.'
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And, now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it be ratified in heaven.
Amen.