

BGO Sermon for 10-16-16 – Revival: It Starts In Us
Acts 11:19-26 (Msg), Acts 26:19-29 (NKJV), Mark 12:28-34 (Msg)



The University of Oxford, United Kingdom. It's really 30 different colleges under one umbrella, much as it was when John Wesley studied & mentored there. And it continues to have the same international reputation that it did in his day.

Most of us either know or have heard about how difficult college life can be, and not just academically, but spiritually. Through distraction, peer pressure or just the constant challenging of ideas, either with civil discussion or hostile debate, many students will begin to question their faith. And many will fall away from the faith, though some will discover or re-discover the truth of the Gospel.

Wesley found both challenge and strengthening at Oxford. Through a group of friends that gathered together to support each other, a group started by his brother Charles, John began developing many of the spiritual practices that would be foundational to the movement he began.



We're continuing a new sermon series this week called "*Revival*." And that's the

goal: reviving our spirits, reviving our churches, and reviving our place as part of the Methodist movement. Along the way, we'll share some of John Wesley's life history, & some of the pictures and insights Amy & I gained on our Wesley pilgrimage to England.



Now I keep saying Methodist movement because Wesley never intended to start a new "church", a new denomination. He continued to hold his position as a clergyman in the Church of England, even though many of the congregations stopped letting him preach in their pulpits (giving me an excuse to put up a picture of me in the pulpit of St. Mary's Church in Oxford, one of the pulpits from which Wesley preached).

Wesley wanted revival, new life, in the church. More importantly, he longed for holiness, total devotion to God, in himself & in others. He and his group tried to live out those words of the Apostle Peter, living a life energetic and blazing with holiness. They wanted to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. So they put their minds in gear. They met often during the week, studying both the Bible and classical works on the Christian life. They took Communion weekly. They would rise sometimes at 4 in the morning for prayer, and continue in prayer throughout the day.



And they really rolled up their sleeves, visiting those in prison and in the poor house, calling on the elderly and shut in, helping to educate the children who couldn't afford schooling, caring for the poor. You might have noticed John Wesley's long hair in the painting here; that's because while at Oxford he stopped going to a barber so he could give that money to the poor. You know, I'd do that myself, but I think I'd have little to show for it.

Of course, with that kind of dedication in that kind of setting, there was bound to be some criticism and even some hostility. Wesley's group was called a number of different names by outsiders: the Holy Club, Sacramentarians, Bible Moths, Bible bigots. But it was their disciplined, methodical lifestyle that brought out the name that has persisted for centuries: Methodists.

That put them in good company. (X) Acts Chapter 11 tells that it was in Antioch that the disciples were for the first time called Christians. That term was meant as an insult, not a complement: it mocked the way Jesus' followers tried to live as "Little Christs" But oh, how those first Christians lived out their faith!

We read about it in Acts 2:

And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property & possessions and shared the money with those in need. They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity—all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

As good as that passage sounds, that doesn't begin to tell the devotion that the early Christians had. Historical accounts tell us that some of them would sell themselves

into slavery so that others could go free; that when unwanted babies would be left on the ground to die, the Christians would go rescue those babies and raise them as their own; that those Christians faced challenges with confidence, grace and peace; that when they did face dying for the faith, they would sing and praise God, even as they were maimed and tortured. And the love they showed to others, believers and non-believers alike? It impressed even the most callous skeptic.

As Jesus was traveling and teaching - and facing constant challenge from the priests, scribes and Pharisees - one of that group actually asked a question that wasn't meant to trick or trap him. ***He put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?"***

Jesus said: ***"The 1st in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion & prayer & intelligence & energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these."***

I did a little checking in the original Greek language that passage was written in, and you know what that word "ALL" means in the Greek? It means "ALL." When God wills it, Scripture records it, and Jesus reaffirms it.

So all our passion - God as the deepest desire of our hearts.

All our prayer- our souls constantly turned towards God, deepening our relationship

All our intellect - God's will and ways always in the forefront of our minds

All our energy - our strength put into serving God and man

That's the kind of love that the Apostle Paul had: one that sent him into all the world to preach the Gospel. Certainly it caused him challenges and difficulties along the way, but he found so much joy, peace and contentment in it all that Paul could say, in answer to King Agrippa's ***"You almost persuade me to become a Christian"***:

"I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

"You almost persuade me to become a Christian." We hear echoes there of Jesus's words to the religious scholar: ***"You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom."*** That became one of John Wesley's main concerns, that many in his day would have a form of holiness on the outside, but stop short of giving themselves totally to God, missing out on the blessings that would come. So he would continually challenge those in his movement to not stop at being "Almost" Christian, but being an altogether committed follower of Christ.



It was that concern which brought Wesley to St. Mary's Chapel at Christ Church College for what would be the last time they let him preach there, with this last sermon hitting a little too close to home for the clergy & scholars there, the priests and Pharisees of his day. He described the Almost Christian to them, then told them what he saw a true Christian being.

Wesley said this:

Whoever has this faith which, by the power of God living within them cleanses their hearts from pride, rage, lust, from everything which is not righteous, and from all things physically and spiritually unclean. Whoever has a heart filled with love stronger than death for both God and humanity; love that does the same things God does and is happy to exhaust all it has for the sake of others. Whoever

joyfully endures being mocked, held in contempt and hated by everyone because they belong to Christ, and embraces whatever suffering God, in His wisdom, allows people and demons to inflict upon them. Whoever has a faith that does all these things, with love as their motive, is not Almost, but truly Christian.

Toward the end of his sermon, Wesley asked these questions - questions designed to bring the listener to examine their hearts. Wesley said:

The greatest question of all of them however, is 'does love for God fill your heart?' Can you cry out, 'My God and my Everything'? Do you want nothing other than Him? Are you satisfied with God? Is He your pride, your delight, the crowning joy of your life? And is this command also in your heart; 'Whoever loves God must also love their Christian brothers and sisters?' (1 John 4:21) Do you therefore love your neighbour as yourself? Do you love everyone, including your enemies and God's enemies, as much as you love your own soul? As much as Christ loved you? Indeed, do you believe that Jesus loved you, and gave Himself for you? Do you believe in His blood? Do you believe that the Lamb of God has taken away your sins, and buried them like a stone dropped into the deepest ocean? Do you believe that he has wiped away the charges against you, taking them from your future and nailing them to His cross? Have you truly been ransomed from Hell by His blood, which was shed for your sins? And does the Holy Spirit confirm to your spirit that you are a child of God?





Those questions reminded me of a story about an old backwoods preacher down south, who preached on that passage from Mark every Sunday for 2 months straight. A church member came to him and said, *“Pastor, I is fed up, You’s preachin’ that same scripture over and over. All we’s heard the last 8 Sundays is “Love God, Love yer neighbor, Love God, Love yer neighbor.”* The pastor straightened up, looked him in the eyes and said, *“Well, is you doin’ it?”*

That’s the question for us today: *“is we doin’ it?”* Can we look at those questions Wesley asks and say “Yes” to them? Are we loving God with all that we are and all we have and loving our neighbors as ourselves, or are we only giving second-best? Wouldn’t it be painful, dreadful, deadly even, to be almost there, right on the border of God’s kingdom, and never cross over the border?

The God we worship here today was all-in for us. He crossed over the border of Heaven for us, coming not as a conquering king, but as a servant. Jesus lived out an example for us of loving God with all His passion and prayer and intelligence and energy, pouring out His life for those near to him and to all humanity, eventually pouring out His life for us on the cross, that we could be free of the chains of sin and death that hold us. What other sacrifice or offering would be fitting than to offer ourselves, all that we are, to Him?

ACTS 2:44-47 (NLT)

⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

ACTS 11:22-26 (Message)

²²⁻²⁴ When the church in Jerusalem got wind of this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check on things. As soon as he arrived, he saw that God was behind and in it all. He threw himself in with them, got behind them, urging them to stay with it the rest of their lives. He was a good man that way, enthusiastic and confident in the Holy Spirit's ways. The community grew large and strong in the Master.

²⁵⁻²⁶ Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. He found him and brought him back to Antioch. They were there a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching a lot of people. It was in Antioch that the disciples were for the first time called Christians.

ACTS 26:19-29 (NKJV)

¹⁹ "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ²⁰ but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance. ²¹ For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill *me*. ²² Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— ²³ that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles."

²⁴ Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, "Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!"

²⁵ But he said, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. ²⁶ For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner. ²⁷ King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe."

²⁸ Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

²⁹ And Paul said, "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains."

1 PETER 1:13-16 (Message)

So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

MARK 12:28-34 (Message)

²⁸ One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: "Which is most important of all the commandments?"

²⁹⁻³¹ Jesus said, "The first in importance is, 'Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.' And here is the second: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment that ranks with these."

³²⁻³³ The religion scholar said, "A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that's better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!"

³⁴ When Jesus realized how insightful he was, he said, "You're almost there, right on the border of God's kingdom." After that, no one else dared ask a question.