



SERMONS

by

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Bible readings: Exodus 17: 1-7 and Romans 5: 1-11
“Justified through faith”

Introduction

Today is our covenant service. For many of us, covenant is akin to a contract or relationship. But what do we mean by this? John Wesley saw the relationship with God in Covenant as being akin to a marriage between human beings (both as a community and as individuals) on one side and God in Christ on the other (cf. Ephesians 5.21-33). It is the means of grace by which we accept the relationship and then seek to sustain it.

From the earliest days of the Methodist societies, John Wesley invited the Methodist people to renew their covenant relationship with God. Wesley drew much of the material for the service from seventeenth-century Puritans (Calvinists), German Protestants, and subsequently made changes to it. The Wesleyan Conference revised it twice during the nineteenth century.

Covenant (OT and NT):

In the Old Testament, God’s irrevocable pledge is that He will be God to Abraham (and his children), Noah (at the end of the flood), Moses (the Ten Commandments), Israel, and their descendants forever. The Abrahamic covenant represents the foundation stone of Israel’s eternal relationship to God, a truth affirmed by David (2 Sam. 7:24), by the Lord Himself (Jeremiah 33:24-26), and by Paul (Rom. 9:4; 11:2, 29). This offer is then extended beyond Israel to all people in Jesus Christ upon His death on the cross, who also provides the supreme example of what it is to live in such a relationship with God.

The Exodus Narrative:

In our first Bible passage from Exodus, by Moses, the whole Israelite community is called to follow by faith. However, confronted with what some might describe as a cost of living crisis and trauma, they stopped trusting God and were looking to Moses as their source and provider - they were combative, ready to stone Moses at some point.

In response, God demonstrated the unlimited nature of His covenant by providing them with life-giving water from a rock. Perhaps their test was on one hand a blessing and life, on the other a test of their trust in God. At times, in my unguarded moments, I wonder what I would have done if I were them.

Surely with everything that’s going on around us regarding the cost of living crisis, we can all relate to some extent, right? Friends, it is not my intention to overwhelm you, but from what I have observed during my short stay here, I’m concerned about the lack of affordable housing. I’m concerned about what we do with our church properties. I’m concerned about joblessness. I’m concerned about the decline of our Church. You may hold a different view and that’s perfectly fine, but we can’t continue with the current trajectory. Friends, there is hope.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Romans 5: 1-4

You see at the heart of Paul’s message is hope and grace. It is very fitting in our current context. Being ‘justified through faith’ means that under the new covenant, faith in Christ is the way to access the grace revealed in Christ’s righteousness. No matter our circumstance we can be at ‘peace with God. Romans 3:23 says, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

1) There is room for all in God’s covenant:

The truth is, we all miss the mark of God's perfection and holiness. But when Jesus came to die on the cross, while we were still sinners He was able to pay the penalty for our sins so that we no longer bear that penalty ourselves. No one is excluded – Jew or Gentile. There is room for all in God’s covenant. The question is, do you really want to change? Do you want to be in a relationship with God? Friends, God can help you to change! Let me assure you, God is ready to enfold you in His generous love, and His decision is not dependent on who deserves it. That’s the good news. But He does demand that we align and direct our lives in consequence of the covenant. One way we can do that is through the Methodist Way of Life. As a Church, our calling is to respond to the gospel of God’s love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission. Friends, as we prepare to renew our covenant today, let us strive to rekindle the Wesleyan fire in our everyday life.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians that the righteousness of God is passed onto us. When we believe in him through faith and our response is rooted in love and repentance, we’re transformed in the eyes of God. That means He looks upon us through the eyes of Christ because we have righteousness.

2) The covenant has justified us by faith:

If you are a believer here this morning, maybe you've only come to faith in recent days and weeks, or maybe you've been a believer for decades, as you prepare to renew your covenant today and receive communion, I want you to know that you are justified in God's presence. That is your status as a Christian, and that is your fundamental identity. This is about the gift of God making you right before him. Friends, this morning, by God’s grace, there’s a genuine invitation for you.

Wesleyan View of Grace:

Prevenient - ‘Coming before’ or ‘proceeding’ gift – unearned and undeserved - which prompts us to turn and respond to God’s saving grace in Christ. Even before we all gathered together as God's people here, we have access. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we were free to approach the bench. **Justifying** - Grace which comes through faith in Christ. **Sanctifying** - Grace which is God’s work by the Spirit through the whole of a life to conform us more and more to Christ.

Friends, I don't know what kind of week you've had or what kind of week you're about to have, but whatever circumstance we find ourselves in this week, we can go into the very presence of a Holy God because of what Jesus has done for us. We're more worthy because of who Jesus is - we've been justified.

3) The covenant is not for the fainthearted:

On the necessity for discipleship, John Wesley wrote, "I am more and more convinced that the devil himself desires nothing more than this, that the people of any place should be half-awakened and then left to themselves to fall asleep again." The Methodist Way of Life and the band and class meeting model offer us a model for discipleship.

For Wesley, 'the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social: no holiness but social holiness'. Holiness, understood as perfect love, is to be lived out in fellowship with others, reflected in our action to seek justice and integrity in everyday life, also through engagement in wider society, and especially through involvement with the disadvantaged and the oppressed.

"There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in." — Desmond Tutu

Friends, we are God's hands and feet. We represent Jesus in the world and therefore, as we prepare to renew our covenant, let me remind you of these words from a famous hymn by Charles Wesley:

Come, let us use the grace divine,
And all, with one accord,
In a perpetual covenant join
Ourselves to Christ the Lord.

Give up ourselves, through Jesu's power,
His name to glorify;
And promise, in this sacred hour,
For God to live and die.

The covenant we this moment make
Be ever kept in mind;
We will no more our God forsake,
Or cast His words behind. **Amen.**