



One Page Sermon

By Pastor Robb McCoy

November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent: Prepare in Hope (Psalm 51)

Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession, and within it are the foundations of our Wesleyan heritage and a great beginning to our Advent journey. This year we will be examining our Wesleyan heritage, and the first place to start any look at John and Charles Wesley's theology is grace.

The Wesleyan understanding of grace has three parts: Prevenient, Justifying, and Sanctifying. The facets of grace are not steps perse, but there is an element of process in this framework of understanding grace. Prevenient grace is the grace that comes before (precedes) all things.

Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession, but in the first verse God's mercy, faithful love, and great compassion are named. A loving, merciful, and compassionate God is the starting point for both this Psalm and a Wesleyan understanding of God's grace. It all starts with love. The Psalmist is acknowledging his own sin, but this does not separate him from God's love. Later in the poem, the writer asks, "Do not throw me out of your presence," and "do not take your Holy Spirit away from me." Both of these pleas imply that the writer remains in God's presence, and that the Holy Spirit is near.

The next aspect of God's grace is justification. Justification comes with confession. It is through God's grace that we can see the ways that our actions have hurt others. God's grace gives us the sight to see where we have fallen short of God's perfect love. Verse 6 reminds us that confession is about truth-telling. God's grace gives us the power to tell the truth about our situation, and recognize the ways that we have as individuals and as a people—acted in selfishness instead of selflessness.

Selfishness does not come from love of self. It comes from fear and an unwillingness to love. Selflessness is not about hating yourself, it comes from seeing yourself as a part of a greater community. Self-sacrifice and generosity does not come from a place of self-flagellation and punishment. Accepting God's forgiveness is not about saving yourself from punishment. It is an acknowledgment that God's love is bigger than my own failings. God's love is bigger than the ways I have sinned. God's love came before I sinned and did not leave me after I sinned. Acknowledging this, trusting it, and accepting it is the radical act of justification.

Verse 7 is the moment of justification, the act of seeking

forgiveness. This amazing grace can be quite emotional. For some, this moment of seeing God's grace clearly can be a ground-breaking, earth-shaking realization. For others, it can be the water in which you swim, noticeable only when it is stirred. I would argue that justification is not a one-and-done thing. We can feel a renewed sense of God's justifying grace when we accept help from a friend, when we serve bread to the hungry, when we read a story of the Gospels with new insight, or when we sing in worship and feel the weight of guilt and shame lifted from our shoulders.

Verses 12 and 13 reveal how sanctification happens after Justification. It is the process of moving closer to God. It is, as John Wesley put it, our journey to move "onward to perfection." For Wesley, perfection was achievable in that all things could be motivated by love. It is our duty as followers of Christ to strive toward perfection. We are to encounter grace, practice grace, and prepare the way for grace in our daily lives.

The Psalmist names sincere worship as the act that will keep us close to God. This is one means of experiencing God's grace. It can also be done through studying the Bible, prayer, taking Communion, and fasting. These are the "Works of Piety" that can move an individual to a deeper knowledge of Christ. There are also "Works of Mercy," where we learn and experience God's grace. These include feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, earning money wisely and saving money so that one can give generously.

I invite you to a grace-filled Advent. We are used to talking of "giving something up for Lent." This Advent, I invite you "take something up for Advent." Take up a means of grace—a deeper prayer life (instructions for one prayer are on the reverse), journal, come to our weekly Communion services on Wednesday night. Take something up that will help you experience more grace, and prepare for a more joyful Christmas.

