

**The Wesley Challenge:
LOVING OTHERS**

Matthew 22:34-40, 25:31-45

It's a challenge to love those people!

A sermon preached by
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I hope everyone is having a happy Father's Day today. Father's Day always lags behind Mother's Day as a celebration, perhaps because many relationships with fathers are more complicated, and mothers just appreciate the sentimentality a little more. Historically, Father's Day lagged behind Mother's Day by 58 years. It was not declared a national holiday until 1972. The preacher's rule of thumb on Father's Day used to be, "On Mother's Day everyone goes to church; on Father's Day everyone goes to the lake." Of course, that's not so true this year. On Mother's Day nobody went to church physically, and today you can be in church even if you are at the lake. And I hope some of you are! So wherever you are today, if you can hear my voice, happy Father's Day!

We are concluding our series of three sermons on The Wesley Challenge today. Over a hundred people have been going through the Wesley Challenge study and looking at 21 questions John and Charles Wesley formulated for their original group of Methodists—the Holy Club at Oxford. This week you either have or will encounter the last seven of these questions.

The foundational Scripture for all three sermons is what we call the Great Commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. We are called to love God, love ourselves, and love others. The Christian life has an upward dimension, and inward dimension, and an outward dimension. Today we will deal with the outward dimension. We love God and ourselves; how do we love others? The Wesleys' Holy Club was known for putting their love of God into action. They visited prisons, taught the children how to read, and took care of the needs of the poor. Apparently, it was a compelling vision of the Christian life, because before John would leave Oxford, the Holy Club increased from 4 to 25 students.

Loving others is the clear command of Christ. Several times in the Gospels he tells the disciples to love one another: "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*"¹ Paul, Peter, and John, who wrote much of the rest of the New Testament, all included statements in

their writings on the importance of loving others: “*This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ...Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ...Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*”² You get my drift.

How are we supposed to accomplish this mission? I don’t think there has ever been a more important and crucial time for us to love one another, but how do we do that? Here are my suggestions.

We love others by listening. We cannot live in the skin of someone else or ever totally understand what it is like to be someone else. But we can listen to their story. We can develop empathy for another person’s experience which is different from ours. We don’t have to move immediately to try to fix somebody else’s predicament. Sometimes the most important thing is just to listen with full attention.

Today in our moment of outrage and outcry about racial injustice, it is important for Christians, especially white Christians, to listen to the voices of the oppressed. Even before we engage in constructive dialog, we just need to try to understand what people of color are saying.

Last week, I was on a Zoom call with three other white pastors and four black pastors from Fort Smith. We had become acquainted through some city events, and we needed to have a conversation. It was a very good time. What pleased me so much was that the white pastors mostly just listened. The best piece of the whole meeting was a young African-American man, a native of Fort Smith and a businessman here in town, who had been invited by one of the pastors to share his perspective. It was illuminating to hear how he had grown up in poverty, how he understood that Fort Smith is divided into the north side and the south side, and how he experienced encounters with the police in a very different way than I ever had. We need to listen to intelligent and articulate voices like his before we ever try to prescribe what should be done,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who gave his life in opposition to the Nazis, wrote about loving others in a book called *Life Together*. He said, “Christians, especially ministers, so often think they must always

contribute something when they are in the company of others, that this is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking.

“Many people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be listening. But he who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God, too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end there is nothing left but spiritual chatter.”³

To love others as Christ commands, first listen. Then treat others with equity and justice. Jesus had a principle of ethics that works in almost any situation. In fact, there is a formulation of this rule in almost every religion on the planet. We call it the Golden Rule: “*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.*”⁴ One of the prophets Jesus was referring to was surely the prophet Amos, who wrote, “*Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate. ...let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*”⁵

I think all of us have failed to love one another at some point. We have let anger and hostility get the best of us, and it has broken our relationships. We have said and done things to hurt others, and we have not been willing to reconcile and repair the breach. We have been satisfied to accept and enjoy the privileges of race and class and wealth and position, without using our privilege to lift others up. But love is not bound by the past. Love leans into the future. When love is the motivation, we always have a shot at redemption, a second chance to make things right.

Ace Collins is a writer of Christian fiction and devotional books who lives in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. His wife is on faculty at Ouachita Baptist University. In one of his books, he tells a story about his grandpa, Tom Shell, who grew up on a farm in Salem, Arkansas, a little town in north central Arkansas. One day in the 1960’s Tom left his job at the post office to go get some lunch. As he passed by the bus stop, he heard a voice call out his name. He looked, and it was a face from childhood, his friend Ben.

As boys, they had lived on neighboring farms and been best of friends. They played together, ate together, Tom visited Ben's church; it was a great friendship, until they were six years old. At that time, Tom went to the school for white children, and Ben went to the school for African-American children. The color line that had never mattered before became a boundary that would define their lives.

Tom and Ben grew up, and their families moved away from their farms in IZARD County. They never would have bumped into one another at restaurants or movie theaters and probably never would have seen each other again if Ben hadn't been making a bus connection that day.

Tom and Ben sat on the town square in Salem and caught up for several minutes, then Tom asked Ben if he would join him for lunch. In Salem in the 1960's, Ben reminded Tom that a black man could not eat in the local café. Up to that point Tom had been a closet racist. Not openly, but he accepted the status quo and never considered the pain that it caused. Looking at his friend Ben, he realized it was time for a new start, a second chance. He took Ben to the café; they sat down at a table; and together they broke the color line.

Tom and Ben remained friends for many years, keeping in touch, getting together, continuing a friendship that had been broken by the boundaries of race but had been reborn in a chance meeting, a friendly shout, and a smile.⁶

We fulfill the call of Christ to love others when we listen and when we treat others with equality and justice. But we love people best of all when we point them to God. This was the last of the 21 questions that the Holy Club considered in their accountability group: "When did I last speak to someone about my faith?"⁷ Apparently it was an issue with the Holy Club, or they would not have asked the question. Even with all their personal devotion and their work in the community, maybe it was still a challenge to speak to strangers about their relationship with Christ. We feel the challenge of that call as well, don't we?

There are two commandments of Jesus that we call great. One is the Great Commandment, which we have been talking about. The other is the Great Commission, the last words of the risen Jesus to the disciples on the mountain in Galilee. He said, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all*

*nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*⁸ This is our call, our charge to keep, our challenge, our responsibility, and our mission. We are to share the love of God with others by pointing them to and helping them find a relationship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Savior. We are his witnesses.

We can make a witness by word and by example. We should be ready to speak the word when the opportunity arises. But most often the opportunity arises because of your example. If you listen to people and treat them with respect and dignity, if you spend your time and energy and money helping people, you will have the opportunity to speak a good word for Jesus because people are going to see how you act and they’re going to wonder what is up with you. And then you tell them.

John Dickson is a professor of Christian history in Australia and has written many books introducing non-believing people to Jesus. But his own conversion came about because someone pointed him to God. When John was in high school, there was still a tradition in Australia to have a weekly Bible lesson in the public school. The teacher of these lessons at John’s high school was a woman named Glenda. She wasn’t a pastor, just a Christian lay person who cared. But she went beyond just teaching a lesson once a week. She invited her entire class to come to her house. She also promised food, which was particularly attractive to the teenagers. Glenda opened her home and her life and her heart to these kids, mostly boys who showed up, and pointed them to Jesus.

John Dickson remembered, “At no point was this teacher pushy or preachy. ...For me, her open, flexible, generous attitude toward us ‘sinners’ was the doorway into a life of faith. As we ate and drank and talked, it was clear this was no missionary ploy on her part. She truly cared for us and treated us like friends or, perhaps more accurately, like sons. As a result, over the course of the next year, she introduced several of us from the class to the ultimate ‘friend of sinners,’ Jesus.”⁹

Most of us came to faith because someone pointed us to Jesus. That’s how it works. A parent, a friend, a teacher, a pastor—somebody has to show

you the way. But in that witness, you can feel the love, can't you? You know that in leading you to Christ, that witness is giving you the best and highest gift possible.

How can you be that person for someone else? How can you share that love? That is a question that should be on your heart every day of your walk with Christ. Because somehow, somewhere, sometime, you are going to have the opportunity to point someone to Jesus. That is the best way you can love anyone—give him or her the gift of eternity.

As I said at the beginning, today is the end of the sermons at least on the Wesley Challenge. Some of you will continue with the questions and discussion for a few more days. But what then? We are not going to leave you hanging. We know that some of you have found these small groups helpful, and maybe some others of you have been thinking, "I wish I had been in one of those small groups." Do not despair! We want to keep our small groups going and add to them moving forward. Since Sunday School will still not happen for a while, this is the best way for you to continue to be involved in learning and supporting one another.

If you have done the Wesley Challenge, you may want to keep your small group and become an accountability group, like a little Holy Club. There are instructions in the back of the Leader Guide for that option.

We are also starting a new series next Sunday on words of hope from the prophets. These ancient preachers have some meaningful words for us today. So we are going to publish some discussion questions following the sermon each week, and your small groups can get together and discuss the sermon, dig deeper into the text, and talk about how your spiritual life has been going.

Or there are lots of resources on prayer and spiritual growth published through Methodist outlets that we can introduce your group to. Whatever suits your needs right now, we want to help you stay spiritually active even though our spiritual activities are limited.

I hope you have enjoyed getting acquainted, either through a small group or just in worship, with the Holy Club questions of the Wesleys. But in the end, it's more than just interesting and quirky history. These are words and questions to lead you toward transformation, to renew your spiritual life, to

help you find healing and forgiveness and grace and strength and peace. John Wesley was all about renewal and revival. So today we will end with the Covenant Prayer of John Wesley. This is the prayer he adapted for use with services when people would renew their commitment to Christ for a new season of growth. I think that's where we are today, so join me in this prayer:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will; rank me with whom you will.

Put me to doing; put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,

Exalted for you or brought low for you.

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 your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

¹ John 13:34-35. Cf. John 15:12-17.

² I John 3:23, 4:7, 11.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 97-8.

⁴ Matthew 7:12.

⁵ Amos 5:15, 24.

⁶ Ace Collins, *Sticks and Stones* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 67-69.

⁷ Chris Folmsbee, *The Wesley Challenge: 21 Days To A More Authentic Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017), 123.

⁸ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁹ John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 51-52.