

**THE SERMONS OF JOHN WESLEY SERIES**  
**SERMON 4: THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY**  
*1 Corinthians 12:31*

The original sermon can be found in  
*The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 26-37.

*Language edited and updated by J. Thomas Johnson – Sunday, June 26, 2022*

*[Why revisit the sermons of John Wesley? What could a preacher from 1700s England have to say that is worth hearing today? I'm not sure. But, I am certain that when I was praying and seeking the Lord about our next sermon series that this was where I was pointed. Methodism today is certainly facing a significant moment of decision. In a purely practical sense, perhaps it is useful for us to return to the beginning of this movement as we consider what it means to be Methodists today.*

*However, I have found an additional blessing in reconsidering Wesley's sermons. I am finding myself challenged to read and understand the Scriptures in ways I had not considered before. For instance, I have often read Jesus as a wisdom teacher who placed ideals before us to which we should strive. Wesley, on the other hand, as will be clear in the sermon today, read Jesus not as an idealist but as One who reveals the will of God to us. Consequently, Wesley read every teaching of Jesus as a revelation of the will of God—almost as a new law by which we should govern our lives. I think this is a perspective sorely lacking in our day, and I have found it refreshing to listen to someone who read and responded to Jesus in this way.*

*In the message today, Wesley sought to be deeply practical. Jesus has taught that to be His disciple one must, "deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Jesus" (Luke 9:23, NASB). Wesley understood this to be a call to a universal lifestyle of self-denial. And so, he sought to explore what a life of self-denial would look like every day. Some of his examples are dated, but all of them were Wesley's attempt to embrace Jesus' call to self-denial in even the smallest areas of his life. Rather than trying to update these applications, I've left them as they were.*

*One more comment before we begin to listen again to Wesley's reading of the Scripture. On some occasions, Wesley gets a little too ascetic, in my opinion. In other words, sometimes Wesley's understanding of self-denial carries with it too much of the Greek philosophical assumption that earthly pleasures were evil in and of themselves. We should recognize that when God created the heavens and the earth, God called the creation good. There is nothing inherently evil in the flesh or in the capacity that we have for pleasure or enjoyment. Also, the Scriptures do not teach that our mental capacities are morally superior to our bodily capacities. I will say that, for his time, Wesley was remarkably balanced in the way he spoke of these things. But, I would caution that self-denial is not simply a way of speaking of restraining bodily desires or of denying oneself pleasure so as to increase one's contemplative devotion to God. The Christian life is a balance of body and spirit, both submitted to God and enjoying all of creation within the boundaries God has set.*

*In any case, without further ado, let's revisit Wesley's sermon, "The More Excellent Way."]*

<sup>31</sup> But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And yet, I am going to show you a far better way (1 Corinthians 12:31, NASB).

In the preceding verses, the Apostle Paul has been speaking about the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as healing of the sick, prophesying, speaking in languages which the speaker had never learned, and the miraculous interpretation of languages. And Paul has said that these gifts of the Holy Spirit are desirable. In fact, Paul encouraged the Corinthians (at least the teachers among them) to desire them earnestly that they themselves might be useful to the body of believers and to the non-Christian world.

“And yet,” Paul has said, “I am going to show you a far better way”—a far more desirable way than all of these put together. This far better way will not fail to lead you to happiness, both in this world and in the world to come. Even if a person had all of these extraordinary gifts, they might find themselves to be miserable, both on earth and in eternity.

It does not appear that the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit were common in the Church for more than two or three centuries. We seldom hear of them after that fatal period when the Roman Emperor Constantine called himself a Christian and, from an empty desire to promote the cause of Christianity, heaped riches and power and honor upon Christians in general and upon the Christian clergy in particular. From that time forward, they ceased almost entirely. And this was not because (as some have ignorantly assumed) “because there was no more need for them,” since all the world had become Christian. This is a miserable mistake. Not even five percent of the world was even marginally Christian in the years that followed.

The real cause of the cessation of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit was that “most people’s love,” the love of almost all Christians, “became cold” (Matthew 24:12, NASB). Christians, then, had no more of the Spirit of Christ than non-Christians. When the Son of Man came to examine His Church, He could hardly find faith on the earth (Luke 18:8). This was the real cause of the cessation of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Christian Church, because Christians had become non-Christians again, and had only a dead form of Christianity left.

However, I do not want to speak today of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit. Today I will speak of the ordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit, and these, too, we should earnestly desire, in order to be more useful in our generation. We may desire the gift of convincing speech in order to probe the unbelieving heart along with the gift of persuasion, both to move the emotions and to enlighten the mind. We may desire knowledge, both of the word of God and of God’s activities in the world. We may desire enough faith to allow us to do miraculous works. We may desire a clear articulation, or a pleasant sermon which is preached in submission to the will of God. We may desire any of these things or other gifts that would allow us to be useful wherever we are. But there is a far better way.

This far better way is the way of love; the way of loving all human beings for God’s sake; the way of humble, gentle, patient love. This is the far better way that Paul has described so clearly in the rest of the chapter. And without this love, Paul has assured us that all eloquence, all knowledge, all faith, all works, and all sufferings are of no more value in the sight of God than that of a series loud, annoying bangs and contribute nothing at all to our salvation. Without love, all we know, all we believe, all we do, and all we suffer will not benefit us at all on the day we stand before Jesus and make an account for how we have lived in this world.

But today I would like to look at this text from a slightly different angle and point out a far better way in another sense. One ancient writer has observed that from the very beginning there have always been two orders of Christians. One order of Christian lives a law-abiding life, is obedient in all things, does

not rebel against the customs or expectations of the world, does many good works, abstains from obvious evils, and attends to the basic requirements of God. These Christians try to live in such a way that their consciences remain clean, but they do not work to improve themselves. In most things, there is no difference between them and their neighbors.

The other order of Christians does not only avoid all kinds of evil, but they are eager for good deeds of every kind. They attend to all the basic requirements of God, but they also desire earnestly to have the attitude in themselves which was also in Christ Jesus, and they try sincerely to live in every way as Jesus lived. In order to do this, they live lives of universal self-denial. They deny themselves daily of any pleasure which they do not believe will prepare them for finding their delight in God. They take up their crosses daily. As Jesus has taught them, they “strive,” they agonize without ceasing, “to enter through the narrow door” (Luke 13:24, NASB). And above all, they are willing to endure any agony or pain that is necessary to arrive at the summit of Christian holiness, “leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, [to] press on to maturity;” (Hebrews 6:1, NASB); “to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that [they] may be filled to all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19, NASB).

From my experience and my observations over a long period of time, I am inclined to believe that whoever finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, whoever is justified, has the choice of walking in the higher or the lower path that I have just described. I believe that at that moment, the Holy Spirit calls this person to the far better way and encourages them to walk in it—to choose the narrowest path in the narrow way, to long for the heights and depths of holiness, to long to embody the full image of God. But, if this person does not accept the Spirit’s offer, they decline into the lower order of Christians, perhaps, at first, without realizing it. This person still walks in what might be considered a good way, serving God in some degree, and they will find mercy at the end of their earthly lives through the blood of the covenant.

I would not want to extinguish a dimly burning wick (Matthew 12:20, NASB). In other words, I would not want to discourage those who are serving God in a lower degree. But, at the same time, I do not want them to remain as they are. I would encourage those on the lower road, to come up higher. Without thundering hell and damnation in their ears, without condemning the lives they are currently living, without telling them that the way they are walking leads to destruction, I will try to point out to them what is, in every respect, a far better way.

And please remember that I am not claiming that all who do not walk on this higher road are on the road to hell. Even so, I am saying that those who walk on the lower road will not have as high a place in the new heavens and the new earth as they would have had had they chosen the better part. And will it be a minor loss to have fewer stars in your crown of glory? Will it be a small thing to have a lower place than you might have had in the kingdom of your Father? Of course, there will be no sorrow in the new heavens and the new earth. There all tears will be wiped from our eyes. But, if it were possible for grief to enter into that place, we would grieve at that irreparable loss. Irreparable then, but not now. Now, by the grace of God, we may still choose the far better way. Let’s compare, in a few particulars, the far better way and the way in which most Christians walk.

Let’s begin at the beginning of the day—in the morning. Most Christians who no longer work for their living or who make their living with a more flexible schedule wake up, particularly in the winter, at eight or nine in the morning, after having slept for eight or nine or more hours. I don’t believe any longer (though I did believe this fifty years ago) that all who indulge themselves in this way are walking on the road to destruction. But, neither do I believe they are on the way to the new heavens and the new earth,

denying themselves, and taking up their crosses daily. I am certain there is a far better way to promote both mental and bodily health.

Being now in my sixties, I have learned that healthy men require, on average, between six and seven hours of sleep, and healthy women often require a little more—from seven to eight hours—each day. In my experience, this amount of sleep is most advantageous to both the body and the spirit. This sleep schedule is preferable to any medication which I have taken, both for preventing and for resolving nervous disorders. It is, therefore, a far better way, in defiance of what is popular and customary, to take only as much sleep as experience proves our bodies require. This is indisputably most conducive to bodily and spiritual health.

So why do so many people not adopt this schedule? Is it because it is difficult? No. With human strength maybe it is challenging for some, but all things are possible with God. And, by God's grace, all things will be possible for you, too. If you bring this matter to God in prayer continually, you will find it not only possible, but easy. Even more, it will be far easier to rise early consistently than only to do it once in a while. But, of course, the routine must be started on the right end. If you want to wake up early, then you must go to sleep early. Impose it on yourself, except in extraordinary circumstances, to go to bed at a fixed time. Then the challenge of it will soon be over, but the advantage of it will remain forever.

Many Christians pray in the morning when they awaken, and most of those probably use some form of prayer that they learned when they were eight or ten years old. Now, I am not condemning those who pray in this way as mocking God (as many do), even though they have used the same prayer, without variation, for twenty or thirty years. But surely, there is a far better way of ordering our private devotions. What if we were to follow the advice given by William Law in his book *A Call to Christians Showing the Necessity of a Devout and Holy Life*? He encourages us to consider our outward and inward states and then to pray accordingly.

For instance, suppose your outward state is prosperous—suppose you are healthy, at ease, having plenty, in good relationship with your family, having good neighbors and good friends. If this is true, then your outward state calls for praise and thanksgiving to God. On the other hand, if you are in difficult circumstances—if God has given you much to be anxious about, if you are in poverty, if you are in need of basic necessities, if you are distressed, if you are at risk of harm, if you are suffering pain or sickness—, then you are clearly called to pour our your heart before God in response to these circumstances.

Similarly, you might pray in ways according to your inward state—your mental, emotional, or psychological state. Do you feel weighed down either from a sense of sin or because of recurrent temptations? Then, let your prayer include whatever confessions, requests, or pleas that might help you in your distress. However, what if you are experiencing peace, what if you are rejoicing in God, what if you are recognizing the ways in which He is comforting you? Then say with the Psalmist, “<sup>28</sup>You are my God, and I give thanks to You; *You are* my God, I exalt You” (Psalm 118:28, NASB). You may also, when you have time, add to your prayers a little reading and meditation, and even a psalm of praise—the natural outflow of a thankful heart. You must certainly see that this is a far better way than you have used before.

Most Christians, after praying, usually then get busy with the work they have been entrusted to do by their employer. Every person that has any desire to be a Christian will not fail to do this, since it is impossible for an idle person to be a good person. Laziness is inconsistent with Christianity. But, how do you understand your worldly work? Do you work primarily to provide things for yourself and for your family? That's a good reason, but it does not go far enough. All people work for those reasons, religious

and non-religious alike. But a Christian may go much further. Our goal in all the work we do is to please God, not to do our own will, but to do the will of the One Who has sent us into the world, to do the will of God on earth as the angels do in the heavens. We work for eternity. We “do not work for the food that perishes” (this is the smallest part of our motives), “but for the food that lasts for eternal life” (John 6:27, NASB). Isn’t this a far better way?

And how do you do your work? I hope you work diligently. I hope that “whatever your hand finds to do, [you] do *it* with *all* your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10, NASB). I hope that you are fair in your work, giving to each person what they are due, in every area of your life. And I hope that you are a merciful person, doing to every person what you would want them to do to you. All of this is good, but a Christian is called to go further, to add faithfulness to God to their fairness, and to add heartfelt prayer to the work of their hands. Without these things, all a person’s diligence and fairness only reveal him or her to be an honorable non-Christian, and there are many who claim to be Christians who go no farther than honorable non-Christians.

And, in which spirit do you work? Do you work in the spirit of the world or in the Spirit of Christ? My fear is that thousands of those who are considered to be good Christians do not even understand what I am asking. If we work in the Spirit of Christ, we walk as Jesus walked in all we do, from the beginning to the end. We do everything in the spirit of sacrifice, giving up our will to the will of God, and continually aiming, not at ease, pleasure, or riches—not at anything this temporary world can provide—, but only at the glory of God. Can anyone really deny that this is a far better way of doing our work in the world?

And these material bodies in which we live in this world require constant care or they will return to the dust from which they were taken even sooner than nature requires. To prevent this, we have to eat every day. Among Heathens in the ancient past it was common to set aside some of what they ate for their gods, even though, as the Apostle Paul has reminded us, their gods were only demons (1 Corinthians 10:14-22). A recent historian has written:

“It seems there was once a similar custom to this in our own country. For we often see a gentleman, before he sits down to dinner in his own house, holding his hat in front of his face, and oftentimes seeming to say something, though usually in a way that no one can tell what he has said.”

Now, what if, instead of superstitious rituals, every parent earnestly requested a blessing from God and gave Him thanks before he or she sat down to eat any meal—breakfast, lunch, or supper? Wouldn’t this be a far better way than to go through a meaningless ritual, which, in the end, is nothing more than a mockery both of God and of humans?

And as to the amount of food we eat, honorable people do not usually eat to excess, at least not so much as to make them sick with food or intoxicated with drink. And most honorable people eat their food politely and with a measure of cheerfulness, which is said to help digestion. So far, so good. And, as long as they only take as much plain, cheap, wholesome food as their body requires for health of mind and body, no one should criticize this. For instance, I would not require anybody to take the advice of the poet George Herbert, who wrote:

Take thy meat; think it dust: Then eat a bit,  
And say with all, Earth to earth I commit.

This is too dreary. It does not fit with the cheerfulness that should be part of a Christian meal. Allow me to illustrate what I mean with a story.

One day the King of France was out hunting with a company of people, and he outrode them. After looking for him for some time, they found him sitting in a cottage eating bread and cheese. When he saw them, he cried out, "Where have I been living? I've never tasted food this good in all my life!" "Sire, said one of them, "you never had so good a sauce before, because you have never been hungry."

Now it is true that hunger makes things taste better, but there is a better sauce than hunger—thankfulness. All food tastes better with thankfulness. And why shouldn't all your meals be seasoned with it? When we eat, we don't need to think about death. We should receive every morsel as a pledge of eternal life. By the food that you eat, your Creator not only delays your dying, but He promises that, very soon, "death shall be swallowed up in victory."

Mealtimes also often include conversation. After all, it is natural to refresh our minds as we refresh our bodies. How should Christians converse together? What topics should they discuss? If our conversations are harmless—if they don't include anything profane, or immodest, or untrue, or unkind—if there is no gossiping, backbiting, or speaking evil about people, then we have reason to thank God for keeping us from these evils. But there is more than this that is involved in conducting ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27, NASB).

First, our conversations must be good—that is, the things we talk about should be good things. As the Apostle Paul has taught us: "Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth" (Ephesians 4:29a, NASB). In other words, we should not discuss just anything that occurs to us or anything that might be occurring in the world around us. What have we to do with politics and government? It is not our business to fight the wars or to reform the state, unless a remarkable event requires us to comment on the justice or mercy of God. Of course, sometimes we have to speak of worldly things. Otherwise, we might as well leave the world. But we should only do this when absolutely necessary, and then we should quickly return to better subjects.

Secondly, Paul continued in Ephesians by saying, "but if *there is* any good *word* for edification according to the need *of the moment*, say that, so that it will give grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29b, NASB). Therefore, our conversation should be deliberately designed to strengthen or build up both us and our hearers either in faith or in love or in holiness. Thirdly, we must ensure that our conversation is not only interesting or entertaining, but that it in some way gives grace to those who hear. Now isn't this a far better way of conversing than simply by aiming to be harmless?

So far, we have discussed far better ways both of governing our conversations and of doing our work in the world. But we cannot always be working. Both our bodies and our minds require some relaxation. We need intervals of rest from work. I will have to speak very bluntly about this because it a subject which many have misunderstood.

Leisure activities are quite varied. There are sporting activities like hunting, shooting, and fishing. Some activities are more social, such as races, costume parties, movies or plays, dances, and concerts. Others are more private, such as playing cards or reading. Some activities which used to be popular are not any longer. For instance, noble men and women rarely engage in hawking any more, and the rest of us rarely watch people fight each other with swords, staffs, or sticks. We no longer use dogs to attack bears or bulls for sport. And, if it were not because of a few wealthy investors, cock-fighting would not be

practiced in England at all anymore. I don't want to say anymore about these foul remains of barbarity than that they are an offense not only to the Christian religion, but to the very nature of what it means to be human.

Of course, I would not condemn sporting activities in the same way. If one has nothing better to do, then feel free to run foxes and rabbits out of breath. I don't want to comment on horse races, either, unless someone wants to try to debate the issue. When it comes to movies or plays, I don't personally allow myself to watch dramatic plays or movies. I can't watch them with a clear conscience, at least not in an English theatre, given all the profanity and lustful and sinful behaviors that are routinely featured there, but possibly others can.

I can't say very much about balls or formal parties, which, even though they are generally more upstanding than costume parties, tend to have the same general spirit. So, certainly have all public venues which include dancing. And, of course, given the way dancing is done today, this is not surprising. In the ancient past men and women never danced together, but always in separate rooms. This was the way dancing was done in ancient Greece and for a long time in Rome. In both those societies men and women would only have danced together in the course of engaging in prostitution. When it comes to playing cards, I feel the same as I do about seeing plays or movies. I cannot do it myself with a clear conscience, but I don't pass judgment on anyone who feels differently. I leave that decision between them and God, since they need to answer to Him, not to me, for their decisions.

But, even if all of the activities that I've just discussed were all innocent diversions, for those of us who love and fear God aren't there far better ways of spending our free time? If people of strong character want to spend their free time outdoors, then they could consider working in their yards or planting and maintaining gardens, or they could visit and talk with the wiser of their neighbors, or they could visit the sick, the poor, the widows, and the fatherless. If they wanted to spend their free time inside, they could read meaningful books on history or religious writings or books on nature. They could learn to play a musical instrument or stretch themselves by doing activities to challenge and strengthen their minds. But, more than all of this, when we have learned how to pray and converse with God, we will find that as the air fills the sky so prayer will be part of all that we do. Then we will be able to say that we are aware of God's presence in every moment of every day.

I want to consider one more subject—that is, the use of money. How do most Christians use money? And is there a far better way?

Many Christians usually set apart some of their yearly income for charitable uses. I have known a few people who said, like Zaccheus, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I am giving to the poor" (Luke 19:8, NASB). O how I pray to God that He would multiply these sorts of people on the earth! But, even though few make this kind of commitment, there are thousands who give large amounts of money to the poor each year, especially in response to a tragedy or crisis. I praise God for all who respond in this way. May they never grow weary of doing good! May God restore what they have given, seven-fold! But still, I want to show you a far better way.

Each of us should consider ourselves as a person into whose hands God has entrusted a part of His wealth which is to be used according to His direction. And God's direction is that each of us should consider ourselves as only one of a number of impoverished people who are to be cared for out of the portion of His wealth that He has entrusted to us. You have two advantages over the others who are to be cared for out of the wealth entrusted to you: First, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts

20:35, NASB). Second, you are to care for yourself first and others second. This is how Christians are to see both themselves and others.

But, to be even more candid: if you have no family, then after you have provided for yourself, give away all that remains, so that

Each Christmas your accounts may clear,  
And wind your bottom round the year.

This was the practice of all the young people at Oxford who were called Methodists. For example: one of them earned thirty pounds a year [which is equivalent to about \$6,500 today]. He lived on 28 and gave away 2. Three years later he made ninety pounds [equivalent to near \$20,000 today]. He still lived on 28, and gave away 62. The next year he made 120 pounds [equivalent to \$26,000 today]. He still lived on 28, and gave away 92 to the poor. Isn't this a far better way?

Secondly, if you have a family, seriously consider in prayer with God how much each member of the family truly needs in order to have what is necessary for life and for godliness. And in general, do not allow them to have less than this, but also, do not allow them to have much more than you allow yourself. Thirdly, having done this, commit yourself to not raising your standard of living. I charge you in the name of God, do not increase your standard of living! As more income comes daily or yearly than you need, let it go. Otherwise, you are laying up for yourself treasure on earth. And this our Lord Jesus forbid us to do just as He forbid murder and adultery. By storing up treasure on earth, therefore, we are "storing up wrath for [ourselves] on the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God" (Romans 2:5, NASB).

But suppose that storing up treasure on earth were not forbidden by Jesus. How could we find it wise to spend money in a way which God may possibly forgive instead of spending it in a way which God will most certainly reward? We will not receive any reward in heaven for what we save up. We will only receive a reward in heaven for what we give away. Every dollar we put into an earthly savings account is lost. It bears no interest in heaven. But every dollar we give to the poor is put into the bank of heaven. And it will bring glorious interest which will accumulate throughout all of eternity.

<sup>13</sup> "Who among you is wise and understanding?" (James 3:13, NASB). Let the wise person decide today, at this hour and moment, by God's help, to choose in all ways the far better way. And let him or her faithfully walk in it in sleep, prayer, work, food, conversation, and leisure, and particularly with regard to the use of money. This one thing I will do, I will store up treasure in heaven; I will give to God the things that are God's; I will give Him all my goods, and all my heart! [Amen.]