

A Year with John Wesley and Our Methodist Values, 11–12.
Randy L. Maddox et al. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, [2008].

John Wesley on the Dedicated Christian Life Randy L. Maddox

One of the central themes running through the breadth of John Wesley's writings is the importance of dedicating oneself—heart and life—to God, following the model of Jesus Christ.

Wesley imbibed this emphasis from his parents. It was reinforced by his studies. As recorded in the opening of *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley read Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying* when he was twenty-three, which led him to “dedicate *all my life* to God; *all my thoughts, and words, and actions.*” Shortly after he read Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, which helped him to see that giving “*all my life* to God (supposing it possible to do this and go no farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave *my heart.*” This classic text by Kempis had such impact on Wesley that in 1735 he issued an abridgement, titled *The Christian's Pattern*, as one of his first publications.

Occasionally this emphasis of the early Wesley is characterized as “works righteousness,” with the implication that he set it aside when he came to appreciate God's “free grace” in 1738. But this is to misunderstand the freedom that grace brings. For Wesley, the grace of God is not only the unmerited mercy by which we are *free from* the guilt of our sin, it is also the power of the Holy Spirit poured into our lives, setting us *free for* renewed obedience to God. If there is anything distinct in Wesley's preaching about the importance of submitting to God's ways after 1738, it is

the stronger emphasis that “every command in holy writ is only a covered promise,” as he put it in his fifth discourse on the Sermon on the Mount (par. II.3). Wesley reminds his hearers in this sermon of God’s promise in Jeremiah 31:31 to write the covenant on our heart. The God of grace does not set aside the law, rather God graciously enables our fulfillment of it.

While God’s grace is freeing, it is also resistible. Wesley stressed this balance in his classic sermon “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” affirming that it is only because of the power of the Holy Spirit that we *can* work out our salvation, but adding that we *must* join as “workers together with God” in this journey. In other sermons Wesley makes clear that we are graciously invited to be fellow workers not only in our own salvation, but in God’s larger redeeming work in the world. As a means of encouraging his people to embrace this call, dedicating the whole of their lives to God, Wesley printed an extract of *The Christian Pattern* repeatedly throughout his ministry.

The mature Wesley also came to appreciate that the interactive nature of God’s empowerment and our response meant that the dedication of oneself to God, like every other dimension of the *way* of salvation, was open to breach as well as to deepened commitment. This led him in 1755 to introduce in the Methodist societies a practice of regular *renewal* of one’s dedication to God, adapting Richard Alleine’s “covenant renewal service.” This service soon became a yearly staple of Methodist life and has proven for many an effective means in deepening their dedication to God.