

# On God's Vineyard

## By John Wesley

Text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor  
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Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 107 "On God's Vineyard" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Apr 20,2024)

**Sermon Number** Sermon 107

**Sermon Title** On God's Vineyard

**Sermon Footnote** (text of the 1872 edition)

**Sermon Scripture** "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" Isa. 5:4.

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### INTRO

The vineyard of the Lord, taking the word in its widest sense, may include the whole world. All the inhabitants of the earth may, in some sense, be called "the vineyard of the Lord;" "who hath made all nations of men, to dwell on all the face of the earth; that they might seek the Lord, if haply they may feel after him, and find him." But, in a narrower sense, the vineyard of the Lord may mean the Christian world; that is, all that name the name of Christ, and profess to obey his word. In a still narrower sense, it may be understood of what is termed the Reformed part of the Christian Church. In the narrowest of all, one may, by that phrase, "the vineyard of the Lord," mean, the body of people commonly called Methodists. In this sense I understand it now, meaning thereby that society only which began at Oxford in the year 1729, and remain united at this day. Understanding the word in this sense, I repeat the question which God proposes to the Prophet: "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?" What could God have done more in this his vineyard, (suppose he had designed it should put forth great branches and spread over the earth,) which he hath not done in it, I. With regard to doctrine? II. With regard

to spiritual helps? III. With regard to discipline? And, IV. With regard to outward protection? These things being considered, I would then briefly inquire, "Wherefore, when he looked it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?"

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## I

I. 1. First. What could have been done in this his vineyard, which God hath not done in it? What could have been done more, with regard to doctrine? From the very beginning, from the time that four young men united together, each of them was homo unius libri, -- "a man of one book." God taught them all, to make his "word a lantern unto their feet, and a light in all their paths." They had one, and only one, rule of judgment, with regard to all their tempers, words, and actions; namely, the oracles of God. They were one and all determined to be Bible-Christians. They were continually reproached for this very thing; some terming them, in derision, Bible-bigots; others, Bible-moths; feeding, they said, upon the Bible, as moths do upon cloth. And indeed, unto this day, it is their constant endeavour to think and speak as the oracles of God.

2. It is true, a learned man, Dr. Trapp, soon after their setting out, gave a very different account of them. "When I saw," said the Doctor, "these two books, The Treatise on Christian Perfection," and The Serious Call to a Holy Life," I thought, These books will certainly do mischief. And so it proved; for presently after up sprung the Methodists. So he (Mr. Law) was their parent." Although this was not entirely true, yet there was some truth in it. All the Methodists carefully read these books, and were greatly profited thereby. Yet they did by no means spring from them, but from the Holy Scriptures; being "born again," as St. Peter speaks, "by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever."

3. Another learned man, the late Bishop Warburton, roundly affirms, that "they were the offspring of Mr. Law and Count Zinzendorf together." But this was a greater mistake still. For they had met together several years before they had the least acquaintance with Count Zinzendorf, or even knew there was such a person in the world. And when they did know him, although they esteemed him very highly in

love, yet they did not dare to follow him one step farther than they were warranted by the Scripture.

4. The book which, next to the Holy Scripture, was of the greatest use to them, in settling their judgment as to the grand point of justification by faith, was the book of Homilies. They were never clearly convinced that we are justified by faith alone, till they carefully consulted these, and compared them with the sacred writings, particularly St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. And no Minister of the Church can, with any decency, oppose these; seeing at his ordination he subscribed to them, in subscribing the thirty-sixth Article of the Church.

5. It has been frequently observed, that very few were clear in their judgment both with regard to justification and sanctification. Many who have spoken and written admirably well concerning justification, had no clear conception, nay, were totally ignorant, of the doctrine of sanctification. Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it? In order to be thoroughly convinced of this, of his total ignorance with regard to sanctification, there needs no more than to read over, without prejudice, his celebrated comment on the Epistle to the Galatians. On the other hand, how many writers of the Romish Church (as Francis Sales and Juan de Castaniza, in particular) have wrote strongly and scripturally on sanctification, who, nevertheless, were entirely unacquainted with the nature of justification! insomuch that the whole body of their Divines at the Council of Trent, in their Catechismus ad Parochos, (Catechism which every parish Priest is to teach his people,) totally confound sanctification and justification together. But it has pleased God to give the Methodists a full and clear knowledge of each, and the wide difference between them.

6. They know, indeed, that at the same time a man is justified, sanctification properly begins. For when he is justified, he is "born again," "born from above," "born of the Spirit;" which, although it is not (as some suppose) the whole process of sanctification, is doubtless the gate of it. Of this, likewise, God has given them a full view. They know, the new birth implies as great a change in the soul, in him that is "born

of the Spirit," as was wrought in his body when he was born of a woman: Not an outward change only, as from drunkenness to sobriety, from robbery or theft to honesty; (this is the poor, dry, miserable conceit of those that know nothing of real religion;) but an inward change from all unholy, to all holy tempers, -- from pride to humility, from passionateness to meekness, from peevishness and discontent to patience and resignation; in a word, from an earthly, sensual, devilish mind, to the mind that was in Christ Jesus.

7. It is true, a late very eminent author, in his strange "Treatise on Regeneration," proceeds entirely on the supposition, that it is the whole gradual progress of sanctification. No; it is only the threshold of sanctification, the first entrance upon it. And as, in the natural birth, a man is born at once, and then grows larger and stronger by degrees; so in the spiritual birth, a man is born at once, and then gradually increases in spiritual stature and strength. The new birth, therefore, is the first point of sanctification, which may increase more and more unto the perfect day.

8. It is, then, a great blessing given to this people, that as they do not think or speak of justification so as to supersede sanctification, so neither do they think or speak of sanctification so as to supersede justification. They take care to keep each in its own place, laying equal stress on one and the other. They know God has joined these together, and it is not for man to put them asunder: Therefore they maintain, with equal zeal and diligence, the doctrine of free, full, present justification, on the one hand, and of entire sanctification both of heart and life, on the other; being as tenacious of inward holiness as any Mystic, and of outward, as any Pharisee.

9. Who then is a Christian, according to the light which God hath vouchsafed to this people? He that, being "justified by faith, hath peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ;" and, at the same time, is "born again," "born from above," "born of the Spirit;" inwardly changed from the image of the devil, to that "image of God wherein he was created:" He that finds the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him; and whom this love sweetly constrains to love his neighbor, every man, as himself: He that has learned of his Lord to

be meek and lowly in heart, and in every state to be content: He in whom is that whole mind, all those tempers, which were also in Christ Jesus: He that abstains from all appearance of evil in his actions, and that offends not with his tongue: He that walks in all the commandments of God, and in all his ordinances, blameless: He that, in all his intercourse with men, does to others as he would they should do to him; and in his whole life and conversation, whether he eats or drinks, or whatsoever he doeth, doeth all to the glory of God. Now, what could God have done more for this his vineyard, which he hath not done in it, with regard to doctrine? We are to inquire,

## II

II. Secondly, What could have been done which he hath not done in it, with regard to spiritual helps?

1. Let us consider this matter from the very beginning. Two young Clergymen, not very remarkable any way, of middle age, having a tolerable measure of health, though rather weak than strong, began, about fifty years ago, to call sinners to repentance. This they did, for a time, in many of the churches in and about London. But two difficulties arose: First. The churches were so crowded, that many of the parishioners could not get in. Secondly. They preached new doctrines, -- that we are saved by faith, and that "without holiness no man could see the Lord." For one or other of these reasons, they were not long suffered to preach in the churches. They then preached in Moorfields, Kennington-Common, and in many other public places. The fruit of their preaching quickly appeared. Many sinners were changed both in heart and life. But it seemed this could not continue long; for every one clearly saw, these Preachers would quickly wear themselves out; and no Clergyman dared to assist them. But soon one and another, though not ordained, offered to assist them. God gave a signal blessing to their word. Many sinners were thoroughly convinced of sin, and many truly converted to God. Their assistants increased, both in number, and in the success of their labours. Some of them were learned: some unlearned. Most of them were young; a few middle-aged: Some of them were weak; some, on the contrary, of remarkably strong understanding. But it pleased God to own them all; so that more and more brands were

plucked out of the burning.

2. It may be observed, that these Clergymen, all this time, had no plan at all. They only went hither and thither, wherever they had a prospect of saving souls from death. But when more and more asked, "What must I do to be saved?" they were desired to meet all together. Twelve came the first Thursday night; forty the next; soon after, a hundred. And they continued to increase, till, three or four and twenty years ago, the London Society amounted to about 2,800.

3. "But how should this multitude of people be kept together? And how should it be known whether they walked worthy of their profession?" They were providentially led, when they were thinking on another thing, namely, paying the public debt, to divide all the people into little companies, or classes, according to their places of abode, and appoint one person in each class to see all the rest weekly. By this means it was quickly discovered if any of them lived in any known sin. If they did, they were first admonished; and, when judged incorrigible, excluded from the society.

4. This division of the people, and exclusion of those that walked disorderly, without any respect of persons, were helps which few other communities had. To these, as the societies increased, was soon added another. The stewards of the societies in each district were desired to meet the Preachers once a quarter, in some central place, to give an account of the spiritual and temporal state of their several societies. The use of these quarterly meetings was soon found to be exceeding great; in consideration of which, they were gradually spread to all the societies in the kingdom.

5. In order to increase the union between the Preachers, as well as that of the people, they were desired to meet all together in London; and, some time after, a select number of them. Afterwards, for more convenience, they met at London, Bristol, and Leeds, alternately. They spent a few days together in this general Conference, in considering what might most conduce to the general good. The result was immediately signified to all their brethren. And they soon found, that what St. Paul observes of the whole Church, may be, in a measure,

applied to every part of it: "The whole body being fitly framed together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, maketh increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love." (Eph. 4:6.)

6. That this may be the more effectually done, they have another excellent help, in the constant change of Preachers; it being their rule, that no Preacher shall remain in the same circuit more than two years together, and few of them more than one year. Some, indeed, have imagined that this was a hindrance to the work of God: But long experience, in every part of the kingdom, proves the contrary. This has always shown that the people profit less by any one person than by a variety of Preachers; while they Used the gifts on each bestow'd, Temper'd by the art of God.

7. Together with these helps, which are peculiar to their own society, they have all those which are enjoyed in common by the other members of the Church of England. Indeed, they have been long pressed to separate from it; to which they have had temptations of every kind. But they cannot, they dare not, they will not, separate from it, while they can remain therein with a clear conscience. It is true, if any sinful terms of communion were imposed upon them, then they would be constrained to separate; but as this is not the case at present, we rejoice to continue therein.

8. What then could God have done more for this his vineyard, which he hath not done in it, with regard to spiritual helps? He has hardly dealt so with any other people in the Christian world. If it be said, "He could have made them a separate people, like the Moravian Brethren;" I answer, This would have been a direct contradiction to his whole design in raising them up; namely, to spread scriptural religion throughout the land, among people of every denomination, leaving every one to hold his own opinions, and to follow his own mode of worship. This could only be done effectually, by leaving these things as they were, and endeavouring to leaven the whole nation with that "faith that worketh by love."

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### **III**

III. 1. Such are the spiritual helps which God has bestowed on this his

vineyard with no sparing hand. Discipline might be inserted among these; but we may as well speak of it under a separate head. It is certain that, in this respect, the Methodists are a highly favoured people. Nothing can be more simple, nothing more rational, than the Methodist discipline: It is entirely founded on common sense, particularly applying the general rules of Scripture. Any person determined to save his soul may be united (this is the only condition required) with them. But this desire must be evidenced by three marks: Avoiding all known sin; doing good after his power; and, attending all the ordinances of God. He is then placed in such a class as is convenient for him, where he spends about an hour in a week. And, the next quarter, if nothing is objected to him, he is admitted into the society: And therein he may continue as long as he continues to meet his brethren, and walks according to his profession.

2. Their public service is at five in the morning, and six or seven in the evening, that their temporal business may not be hindered. Only on Sunday it begins between nine and ten, and concludes with the Lord's Supper. On Sunday evening the society meets; but care is taken to dismiss them early, that all the heads of families may have time to instruct their several households. Once a quarter, the principal Preacher in every circuit examines every member of the societies therein. By this means, if the behaviour of anyone is blameable, which is frequently to be expected in so numerous a body of people, it is easily discovered, and either the offence or the offender removed in time.

3. Whenever it is needful to exclude any disorderly member out of the society, it is done in the most quiet and inoffensive manner; only by not renewing his ticket at the quarterly visitation. But in some cases, where the offence is great, and there is danger of public scandal, it is judged necessary to declare, when all the members are present, "A. B. is no longer a member of our society." Now, what can be more rational or more scriptural than this simple discipline; attended, from the beginning to the end, with no trouble, expense, or delay?

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## **IV**

IV. 1. But was it possible, that all these things should be done without a



flood of opposition? The prince of this world was not dead, nor asleep: and would he not fight, that his kingdom might not be delivered up? If the word of the Apostle be found true, in all ages and nations, "All they that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution;" if this be true, with regard to every individual Christian, how much more with regard to bodies of men visibly united together with the avowed design to overthrow his kingdom! And what could withstand the persecution he would not fail to stir up against a poor, defenceless, despised people, without any visible help, without money, without power, without friends?

2. In truth, the god of this world was not asleep. Neither was he idle. He did fight, and that with all his power, that his kingdom might not be delivered up. He "brought forth all his hosts to war." First. He stirred up the beasts of the people. They roared like lions; they encompassed the little and defenceless on every side. And the storm rose higher and higher, till deliverance came in a way that none expected. God stirred up the heart of our late gracious Sovereign to give such orders to his Magistrates as, being put in execution, effectually quelled the madness of the people. It was about the same time that a great man applied personally to His Majesty, begging that he would please to "take a course to stop these run-about Preachers." His Majesty, looking sternly upon him, answered without ceremony, like a King, "I tell you, while I sit on the throne, no man shall be persecuted for conscience" sake."

3. But in defiance of this, several who bore His Majesty's commission have persecuted them from time to time; and that under colour of law; availing themselves of what is called the Conventicle Act: One in particular, in Kent, who, some years since, took upon him to fine one of the Preachers and several of his hearers. But they thought it their duty to appeal to His Majesty's Court of King's Bench. The cause was given for the plaintiffs; who have ever since been permitted to worship God according to their own conscience.

4. I believe this is a thing wholly without precedent. I find no other instance of it, in any age of the Church, from the day of Pentecost to this day. Every opinion, right and wrong, has been tolerated, almost in every age and nation. Every mode of worship has been tolerated,

however superstitious or absurd. But I do not know that true, vital, scriptural religion was ever tolerated before. For this the people called Methodists have abundant reason to praise God. In their favour he hath wrought a new thing in the earth: He hath stilled the enemy and the avenger. This then they must ascribe unto Him, the Author of their outward as well as inward peace.

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## V

V. 1. What indeed could God have done more for this his vineyard, which he hath not done in it? This having been largely showed, we may now proceed to that strong and tender expostulation: "After all that I had done, might I not have looked for the most excellent grapes? Wherefore, then, brought it forth wild grapes? Might I not have expected a general increase of faith and love, of righteousness and true holiness; yea, and of the fruit of the Spirit, -- love, joy, peace, long-suffering, meekness, gentleness, fidelity, goodness, temperance?" Was it not reasonable to expect that these fruits would have overspread his whole Church? Truly, when I saw what God had done among his people between forty and fifty years ago; when I saw them warm in their first love, magnifying the Lord, and rejoicing in God their Saviour; I could expect nothing less than that all these would have lived like angels here below; that they would have walked as continually seeing Him that is invisible; having constant communion with the Father and the Son, living in eternity, and walking in eternity. I looked to see "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people," in the whole tenor of their conversation; "showing forth His praise, who had called them into his marvellous light."

2. But, instead of this, it brought forth wild grapes, -- fruit of a quite contrary nature. It brought forth error in ten thousand shapes, turning many of the simple out of the way. It brought forth enthusiasm, imaginary inspiration, ascribing to the all-wise God all the wild, absurd, self-inconsistent dreams of a heated imagination. It brought forth pride, robbing the Giver of every good gift of the honour due to his name. It brought forth prejudice, evil surmising, censoriousness, judging, and condemning one another; -- all totally subversive of that brotherly love which is the very badge of the Christian profession; without which

whosoever liveth is counted dead before God. It brought forth anger, hatred, malice, revenge, and every evil word and work; -- all direful fruits, not of the Holy Spirit, but of the bottomless pit!

3. It brought forth likewise in many, particularly those that are increased in goods, that grand poison of souls, the love of the world; and that in all its branches: "The desire of the flesh;" that is, the seeking happiness in the pleasures of sense; -- "the desire of the eyes;" that is, seeking happiness in dress, or any of the pleasures of imagination; -- and "the pride of life;" that is, seeking happiness in the praise of men; or in that which ministers to all these, laying up treasures on earth. It brought forth self-indulgence of every kind, delicacy, effeminacy, softness; but not softness of the right kind, that melts at human woe. It brought such base, grovelling affections, such deep earthly-mindedness, as that of the poor Heathens, which occasioned the lamentation of their own Poet over them, -- *O curvae in terras animae et coelestium inanes!* -- "O souls bowed down to earth, and void of God!"

4. O ye that have riches in possession, once more hear the word of the Lord! Ye that are rich in this world, that have food to eat, and raiment to put on, and something over, are you clear of the curse of loving the world? Are you sensible of your danger? Do you feel, "How hardly will they that have riches enter into the kingdom of heaven?" Do you continue unburned in the midst of the fire? Are you untouched with the love of the world? Are you clear from the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life? Do you "put a knife to your throat," when you sit down to meat, lest your table should be a snare to you? Is not your belly your god? Is not eating and drinking, or any other pleasure of sense, the greatest pleasure you enjoy? Do not you seek happiness in dress, furniture, pictures, gardens, or anything else that pleases the eye? Do not you grow soft and delicate; unable to bear cold, heat, the wind or the rain, as you did when you were poor? Are you not increasing in goods, laying up treasures on earth; instead of restoring to God in the poor, not so much, or so much, but all that you can spare? Surely, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven!"

5. But why will ye still bring forth wild grapes? What excuse can ye

make? Hath God been wanting on his part? Have you not been warned over and over? Have ye not been fed with "the sincere milk of the word?" Hath not the whole word of God been delivered to you, and without any mixture of error? Were not the fundamental doctrines both of free, full, present justification delivered to you, as well as sanctification, both gradual and instantaneous? Was not every branch both of inward and outward holiness clearly opened, and earnestly applied; and that by Preachers of every kind, young and old, learned and unlearned? But it is well if some of you did not despise the helps which God had prepared for you. Perhaps you would hear none but Clergymen; or, at least, none but men of learning. Will you not then give God leave to choose his own messengers? to send by whom he will send? It is well if this bad wisdom was not one cause of your bringing forth wild grapes!

6. Was not another cause of it your despising that excellent help, union with a Christian society? Have you not read, "How can one be warm alone?" and, "Woe be unto him that is alone when he falleth?" But you have companions enough. Perhaps more than enough; more than are helpful to your soul. But have you enough that are athirst for God, and that labour to make you so? Have you companions enough that watch over your soul, as they that must give account; and that freely and faithfully warn you, if you take any false step, or are in danger of doing so? I fear you have few of these companions, or else you would bring forth better fruit!

7. If you are a member of the society, do you make a full use of your privilege? Do you never fail to meet your class; and that not as matter of form, but expecting that when you are met together in his name, your Lord will be in the midst of you? Are you truly thankful for the amazing liberty of conscience which is vouchsafed to you and your brethren; such as never was enjoyed before by persons in your circumstances? And are you thankful to the Giver of every good gift for the general spread of true religion? Surely, you can never praise God enough for all these blessings, so plentifully showered down upon you, till you praise him with angels and archangels, and all the company of heaven!

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Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 107 "On God's Vineyard" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Apr 20,2024)