

The Imperfection of Human Knowledge

By John Wesley

Text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor
from www.wordsofwesley.com

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 69 "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Sep 27,2023)

Sermon Number Sermon 69

Sermon Title The Imperfection of Human Knowledge

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition) [Preached at Bristol, March 5, 1784]

Sermon Scripture "We know in part." 1 Cor. 13:9.

Intro

1. The desire of knowledge is an universal principle in man, fixed in his inmost nature. It is not variable, but constant in every rational creature, unless while it is suspended by some stronger desire. And it is insatiable: "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing;" neither the mind with any degree of knowledge which can be conveyed into it. And it is planted in every human soul for excellent purposes. It is intended to hinder our taking up our rest in anything here below; to raise our thoughts to higher and higher objects, more and more worthy our consideration, till we ascend to the Source of all knowledge and all excellence, the all-wise and all-gracious Creator.

2. But although our desire of knowledge has no bounds, yet our knowledge itself has. It is, indeed, confined within very narrow bounds; abundantly narrower than common people imagine, or men of learning are willing to acknowledge: A strong intimation, (since the Creator doeth nothing in vain,) that there will be some future state of being, wherein that now insatiable desire will be satisfied, and there will be no longer so immense a distance between the appetite and the object of it.

3. The present knowledge of man is exactly adapted to his present

wants. It is sufficient to warn us of, and to preserve us from, most of the evils to which we are now exposed; and to procure us whatever is necessary for us in this our infant state of existence. We know enough of the nature and sensible qualities of the things that are round about us, so far as they are subservient to the health and strength of our bodies; we know how to procure and prepare our food; we know what raiment is fit to cover us; we know how build our houses, and to furnish them with all necessaries and conveniences; we know just as much as is conducive to our living comfortably in this world: But of innumerable things above, below, and round about us, we know little more than that they exist. And in this our deep ignorance is seen the goodness as well as the wisdom of God, in cutting short his knowledge on every side, on purpose to "hide pride from man."

4. Therefore it is, that by the very constitution of their nature, the wisest of men "know" but "in part." And how amazingly small a part do they know, either of the Creator, or of his works! This is a very needful but a very displeasing theme; for "vain man would be wise." Let us reflect upon it for awhile. And may the God of wisdom and love open our eyes to discern our own ignorance!

I

I. 1. To begin with the great Creator himself. How astonishingly little do we know of God! -- How small a part of his nature do we know! of his essential attributes! What conception can we form of his omnipresence? Who is able to comprehend how God is in this and every place? how he fills the immensity of space? If philosophers, by denying the existence of a vacuum, only meant that there is no place empty of God, that every point of infinite space is full of God, certainly no man could call it in question. But still, the fact being admitted what is omnipresence or ubiquity? Man is no more able to comprehend this, than to grasp the universe.

2. The omnipresence or immensity of God, Sir Isaac Newton endeavours to illustrate by a strong expression, by terming infinite space, "the Sensorium of the Deity." And the very Heathens did not scruple to say, "All things are full of God:" Just equivalent with his own declaration: --

"Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord." How beautifully does the Psalmist illustrate this! "Whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I go into the heaven, thou art there: If I go down to hell, thou art there also. If I take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea even there thy hand shall find me, and thy right hand shall hold me." But, in the mean time, what conception can we form, either of his eternity or immensity? Such knowledge is too wonderful for us: We cannot attain unto it.

3. A second essential attribute of God is eternity. He existed before all time. Perhaps we might more properly say, He does exist from everlasting to everlasting. But what is eternity? A celebrated author says, that the Divine eternity is *vitae interminabilis tota simul et perfecta possessio*: "The at once entire and perfect possession of never-ending life." But how much wiser are we for this definition? we know just as much of it as we did before. "The at once entire and perfect possession!" Who can conceive what this means?

4. If indeed God had stamped (as some have maintained) an idea of himself on every human soul, we must certainly have understood something of these, as well as his other attributes; for we cannot suppose he would have impressed upon us either a false or an imperfect idea of himself; but the truth is, no man ever did, or does now, find any such idea stamped upon his soul. The little which we do know of God, (except what we receive by the inspiration of the Holy One,) we do not gather from any inward impression, but gradually acquire from without. "The invisible things of God," if they are known at all, "are known from the things that are made;" not from what God hath written in our hearts, but from what he hath written in all his works.

5. Hence then, from his works, particularly his works of creation, we are to learn the knowledge of God. But it is not easy to conceive how little we know even of these. To begin with those that are at a distance: Who knows how far the universe extends? What are the limits of it? The morning stars can tell, who sang together when the lines of it were stretched out, when God said, "This be thy circumference, O world!" But all beyond the fixed stars is utterly hid from the children of men. And what do we know of the fixed stars? Who telleth the number of them?

even that small portion of them that, by their mingled light, form what we call, "the milky way?" And who knows the use of them? Are they so many suns that illuminate their respective planets? Or do they only minister to this, (as Mr. Hutchinson supposes,) and contribute, in some unknown way, to the perpetual circulation of light and spirit? Who knows what comets are? Are they planets not fully formed? or planets destroyed by a conflagration? Or are they bodies of a wholly different nature, of which we can form no idea? Who can tell what is the sun? Its use we know; but who knows of what substance it is composed? Nay, we are not yet able to determine, whether it be fluid or solid! Who knows what is the precise distance of the sun from the earth? Many astronomers are persuaded it is a hundred millions of miles; others, that it is only eighty-six millions, though generally accounted ninety. But equally great men say, it is no more than fifty; some of them, that it is but twelve: Last comes Dr. Rogers, and demonstrates that it is just two millions nine hundred thousand miles! So little do we know even of this glorious luminary, the eye and soul of the lower world! And just as much of the planets that surround him; yea, of our own planet, the moon. Some indeed have discovered River and mountains on her spotty globe; yea, have marked out all her seas and continents! -- But after all, we know just nothing of the matter. We have nothing but mere uncertain conjecture concerning the nearest of all the heavenly bodies.

6. But let come to the things that are still nearer home, and inquire what knowledge we have of them. How much do we know of that wonderful body, light? How is it communicated to us? Does it flow in a continued stream from the sun? Or does the sun impel the particles next his orb, and so on and on, to the extremity of his system? Again: Does light gravitate or not? Does it attract or repel other bodies? Is it subject to the general laws which obtain in all other matter? Or is it a body *siu generis*, altogether different from all other matter? Is it the same with electric fluid, and others arrest its course? Why is the phial capable of being charged to such a point, and no farther? A thousand more questions might be asked on this head, which no man living can answer.

7. But surely we understand the air we breathe, and which encompasses us on every side. By that admirable property of elasticity, it is the general spring of nature. But is elasticity essential to air, and

inseparable from it? Nay, it has lately proved, by numberless experiments, that air may be fixed, that is, divested of its elasticity, and generated or restored to it again. Therefore it is no otherwise elastic, than as it is connected with electric fire. And is not this electric or ethereal fire, the only true essential elastic in nature? Who knows by what power, dew, rain, and all other vapours rise and fall in the air? Can we account for the phenomenon of them upon the common principles? Or must we own, with a late ingenious author, that those principles are utterly insufficient; and that they cannot be rationally accounted for, but upon the principle of electricity?

8. Let us now descend to the earth which we tread upon, and which God has peculiarly given to the children of men. Do the children of men understand this? Suppose the terraqueous globe to be seven or eight thousand miles in diameter, how much of this do we know? Perhaps a mile or two of its surface: So far the art of man has penetrated. But who can inform us, what lies beneath the region of stones, metals, minerals, and other fossils? This is only a thin crust, which bears an exceeding small proportion to the whole. Who can acquaint us with the inner parts of the globe? Whereof do these consist? Is there a central fire, a grand reservoir, which not only supplies the burning mountains, but also ministers (though we know not how) to the ripening of gems and metals; yea, and perhaps to the production of vegetables, and the well-being of animals too? Or is the great deep still contained in the bowels of the earth? a central abyss of waters? Who hath seen? Who can tell? Who can give any solid satisfaction to a rational inquirer?

9. How much of the very surface of the globe is still utterly unknown to us! How very little do we know of the polar regions, either north or south, either in Europe or Asia! How little of these vast countries, the inland parts either of Africa or America! Much less do we know what is contained in the broad sea, the great abyss, which covers so large a part of the globe. Most of its chambers are inaccessible to man, so that we cannot tell how they are furnished. How little we know of those things on the dry land which fall directly under our notice! Consider even the most simple metals or stones: How imperfectly are we acquainted with their nature and properties! Who knows what it is that distinguishes metals from all other fossils? It is answered, "Why, they are heavier." Very

true; but what is the cause of their being heavier? What is the specific difference between metals and stones? or between one metal and another? between gold and silver? between tin and lead? It is all mystery to the sons of men.

10. Proceed we to the vegetable kingdom. Who can demonstrate that the sap, in any vegetable, performs a regular circulation through its vessels, or that it does not? Who can point out the specific difference between one kind of plant and another? or the peculiar, internal conformation and disposition of their component parts? Yea, what man living thoroughly understands the nature and properties of any one planet under heaven?

11. With regard to animals: Are microscopic animals, so called, real animals or no? If they are, are they not essentially different from all other animals in the universe, as not requiring any food, not generating or being generated? Are they no animals at all, but merely inanimate particles of matter, in a state of fermentation? How totally ignorant are the most sagacious of men touching the whole affair of generation! even the generation of men. In the book of the Creator, indeed, were all our members written, "which day by day were fashioned, when as yet were none of them:" But what means was the first motion communicated to the punctum saliens? When, and how, was the immortal spirit superadded to the senseless clay? It is mystery all: And we can only say, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

12. With regard to insects, many are the discoveries which have been lately made. But how little is all that is discovered yet, in comparison of what is undiscovered! How many millions of them, by their extreme minuteness, totally escape all our inquiries! And, indeed, the minute parts of the largest animals elude our utmost diligence. have we a more complete knowledge of fishes that we have of insects? A great part, if not the greatest part, of the inhabitants of the waters are totally concealed from us. It is probable, the species of sea-animals are full as numerous as the land-animals. But how few of them are known to us! And it is very little we know of those few. With birds we are a little better acquainted: And, indeed, it is but a little. For of very many we now hardly anything more than their outward shape. We now a few of the

obvious properties of other, chiefly those that frequent our houses. But we have not a thorough, adequate knowledge even of them. How little do we now of beasts! We do not know whence the different tempers and qualities arise, not only in different species of them, but in individuals of the same species; yea, and frequently in those who spring from the same parents, the same both male and female animal. Are they mere machines? Then they are incapable either of pleasure or pain. Nay, they can have no senses; they neither see nor hear; they neither taste nor smell. Much less can they now, or remember, or move, any otherwise than they are impelled from without. But all this, as daily experiments show, is quite contrary to the matter of fact.

13. Well; but if we know nothing else, do not we now ourselves? our bodies and our souls? What is our soul? It is a spirit, we know. But what is a spirit? Here we are at a full stop. And where is the soul lodged? in the pineal gland, in the whole brain, in the heart, in the blood, in any single part of the body, or (if any one can understand those terms) "all in all, and all in every part?" How is the soul united to the body? a spirit or a clod? What is the secret, imperceptible chain that couples them together? Can the wisest of men give a satisfactory answer to any one of these plain questions? And as to our body itself, how little do we know! During a night's sleep, a healthy man perspires one part in four less when he sweats, than when he does not. Who can account for this? What is flesh? that of the muscles in particular? Are the fibres that compose it of a determinate size, so that they can be divided only so far? Or are they resolvable in infinitum? How does a muscle act? by being inflated, and consequently shortened? But what is it inflated with? If whit blood, how and whence comes that blood? And whither does it go, the moment the muscle is relaxed? Are the nerves pervious or solid? How do they act? by vibration or transmission of the animal spirits? Who knows what the animal spirits are? Are they electric fire? What is sleep? Wherein does it consist? What is dreaming? How can we know dreams from waking thoughts? I doubt no man knows. O how little do we know even concerning the whole creation of God?

II

II. 1. But are we not better acquainted with his works of providence,

than with his works of creation? It is one of the first principles of religion, that his kingdom ruleth over all: so that we may say with confidence, "O Lord our Governor, how excellent is thy name over all the earth!" It is a childish conceit, to suppose chance governs the world, or has any part in the government of it: No, not even in those things that, to the vulgar eye, appear to be perfectly casual. "The lot is cast to the lap; but the disposal thereof is from the Lord." Our blessed Master himself has put this matter beyond all possible doubt: "Not a sparrow," saith he, "falleth to the ground without the will of your Father which is in heaven: Yea," (to express the thing more strongly still,) "even the very hairs of you head are all numbered."

2. But although we are well apprized of this general truth, that all things are governed by the providence of God; (the very language of the heathen orator, *Deorum moderamine cuncta geri;*) yet how amazingly little do we know of the particulars contained under this general! How little do we understand of his providential dealing, either with regard to nations, or families, or individuals! There are heights and depths in all these which our understanding can in no wise fathom. We can comprehend but a small part of his ways now; the rest we shall know hereafter.

3. Even with regard to entire nations, how little do we comprehend of God's providential dealings with them! what innumerable nations in the eastern world once flourished, to the terror of all around them, and are now swept away from the face of the earth; and their memorial is perished with them! Nor has the case been otherwise in the west. In Europe also we read of many large and powerful kingdoms, of which the names only are left: The people are vanished away, and are as though they had never been. But why it has pleased the almighty Governor of the world to sweep them away with the besom of destruction we cannot tell; those who succeeded them being, many times, little better than themselves.

4. But it is not only with regard to ancient nations, that the providential dispensations of God are utterly incomprehensible to us: The same difficulties occur now. We cannot account for his present dealings with the inhabitants of the earth. We know, "the Lord is loving unto every

man, and his mercy is over all his works." But we know not how to reconcile this with the present dispensations of his providence. At this day, is not almost every part of the earth full of darkness and cruel habitations? In what a condition, in particular, is the large and populous empire of Indostan! How many hundred thousands of the poor, quiet people, have been destroyed, and their carcasses left as the dung of the earth! in what a condition (though they have no English ruffians there) are the numberless islands in the Pacific Ocean! How little is their state above that of wolves and bears! And who careth either for their souls or their bodies? But does not the Father of men care for them? O mystery of providence!

5. And who cares for thousands, myriads, if not millions, of the wretched Africans? Are not whole droves of these poor sheep (human, if not rational beings!) continually driven to market, and sold, like cattle, into the vilest bondage, without any hope of deliverance but by death? Who cares for those outcasts or men, the well-known Hottenots? It is true, a late writer has taken much pains to represent them as a respectable people: But from what motive it is not easy to say; since he himself allows (a specimen of their elegance of manners) that the raw guts of sheep and other cattle are not only some of their choicest food, but also the ornaments of their arms and legs; and (a specimen of their religion) that the son is not counted a man, till he has beat his mother almost to death; and when his father grows old, he fastens him to a little hut, and leaves him there to starve! O Father of mercies! are these the works of thy own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood?

6. How little better is either the civil or religious state of the poor American Indians! that is, the miserable remains of them: For in some provinces not one of them is left to breathe. In Hispaniola, when the Christians came thither first, there were three millions of inhabitants. Scarce twelve thousand of them now survive. And in what condition are these, or the other Indians who are still scattered up and down in the vast continent of South or North America? Religion they have none; no public worship of any kind! God is not in all their thoughts. And most of them have no civil government at all; no laws; no magistrates; but every man does what is right in his own eyes. Therefore they are decreasing daily; and, very probably, in a century or two there will not

be one them left.

7. However, the inhabitants of Europe are not in so deplorable a condition. They are in a state of civilization; they have useful laws, and are governed by magistrates; they have religion; they are Christians. I am afraid, whether they are called Christians or not, many of them have not much religion. What say you to thousands of Laplanders, or Finlanders, or Samoiedes, and Greenlanders? indeed, of all who live in high northern latitudes? Are they as civilized as sheep or oxen? To compare them with horses, or any of our domestic animals, would be doing them to much honour. Add to these, myriads of human savages that are freezing among the snow of Siberia, and as many, if not more, who are wandering up and down in the deserts of Tartary. Add thousands upon thousands of Poles and Muscovites; and of Christians, so called, from Turkey in Europe. And did "God so love" these, "that he gave his Son, his only begotten Son, to the end they might not perish, but have everlasting life?" Then why are they thus? O wonder above all wonders!

8. Is there not something equally mysterious in the divine dispensation with regard to Christianity itself? Who can explain why Christianity is not spread as far as sin? Why is not the medicine sent to every place where the disease is found? But alas! It is not: "The sound of it is" not now "gone forth into all lands." The poison is diffused over the whole globe; the antidote is not known in a sixth part of it. Nay, and how is it that the wisdom and goodness of God suffer the antidote itself to be so grievously adulterated, not only in Roman Catholic countries, but almost in every part of the Christian world? So adulterated by mixing it frequently with useless, frequently with poisonous ingredients, that it retains none, or at least a very small part of its original virtue. Yea, it is so thoroughly adulterated by many of those very persons whom he has sent to administer it that it adds tenfold malignity to the disease which it was designed to cure! In consequence of this there is little more mercy or truth to be found among Christians than among pagans. Nay, it has been affirmed and I am afraid truly, that many called Christians are far worse than the heathens that surround them: more profligate, more abandoned to all manner of wickedness, neither fearing God, nor regarding man! O who can comprehend this! Doth not

he who is higher than the highest regard it?

9. Equally incomprehensible to us are many of the divine dispensations with regard to particular families. We cannot at all comprehend why he raises some to wealth, honour, and power and why in the meantime he depresses others with poverty and various afflictions. Some wonderfully prosper in all they take in hand, and the world pours in upon them; while others with all their labour and toil can scarce procure daily bread. And perhaps prosperity and applause continue with the former to their death; while the latter drink the cup of adversity to their life's end -- although no reason appears to us either for the prosperity of the one or the adversity of the other.

10. As little can we account for the divine dispensations with regard to individuals. We know not why the lot of this man is cast in Europe, the lot of that man in the wilds of America; why one is born of rich or noble, the other of poor parents; why the father and mother of one are strong and healthy, those of another weak and diseased; in consequence of which he drags a miserable being all the days of his life, exposed to want, and pain, and a thousand temptations from which he finds no way to escape. How many are from their very infancy hedged in with such relations that they seem to have no chance (as some speak), no possibility of being useful to themselves or others? Why are they, antecedent to their own choice, entangled in such connections? Why are hurtful people so cast in their way that they know not how to escape them? And why are useful persons hid out of their sight, or snatched away from them at their utmost need? O God, how unsearchable are thy judgments or counsels! Too deep to be fathomed by our reason: and thy ways of executing those counsels not to be traced by our wisdom!

III

III. 1. Are we able to search out his works of grace any more than his works of providence? Nothing is more sure than that "without holiness no man shall see the Lord." Why is it then that so vast a majority of mankind are, so far as we can judge, cut off from all means, all possibility of holiness, even from their mother's womb? For instance: what possibility is there that a Hottentot, a New-Zealander, or an

inhabitant of Nova-Zembla, if he lives and dies there, should ever know what holiness means? Or consequently ever attain it? Yea, but one may say: "He sinned before he was born, in a pre-existent state. Therefore he was placed here in so unfavourable a situation. And it is mere mercy that he should have a second trial." I answer: supposing such a pre-existent state, this which you call a second trial is really no trial at all. As soon as he is born into the world he is absolutely in the power of his savage parents and relations, who from the first dawn of reason train him up in the same ignorance, atheism, and barbarity with themselves. He has no chance, so to speak; he has no possibility of any better education. What trial has he then? From the time he comes into the world till he goes out of it again he seems to be under a dire necessity of living in all ungodliness and unrighteousness. But how is this? How can this be the case with so many millions of the souls that God has made? Art thou not the God "of all the ends of the earth, and of them that remain in the broad sea?"

2. I desire it may be observed that if this be improved into an objection against revelation it is an objection that lies full as much against natural as revealed religion. If it were conclusive it would not drive us into Deism, but into flat Atheism. It would conclude not only against the Christian revelation but against the being of a God. And yet I see not how we can avoid the force of it but by resolving all into the unsearchable wisdom of God, together with a deep conviction of our ignorance and inability to fathom his counsels.

3. Even among us who are favoured far above these, -- to whom are entrusted the oracles of God, whose word is a lantern to our feet, and a light in all our paths, -- there are still many circumstances in his dispensations which are above our comprehension. We know not why he suffered us so long to go on in our own ways before we were convinced of sin. Or why he made use of this or the other instrument, and in this or the other manner. And a thousand circumstances attended the process of our conviction which we do not comprehend. We know not why he suffered us to stay so long before he revealed his Son in our hearts; or why this change from darkness to light was accompanied with such and such particular circumstances.

4. It is doubtless the peculiar prerogative of God to reserve the "times and seasons in his own power." And we cannot give any reason, why, of two persons equally athirst for salvation one is presently taken into the favour of God, and the other left to mourn for months or years. One, as soon as he calls upon God, is answered, and filled with peace and joy in believing; another seeks after him, and, it seems, with the same degree of sincerity and earnestness, and yet cannot find him, or any consciousness of his favour, for weeks, or months, or years. We know well this cannot possibly be owing to any absolute decree, consigning, one before he was born to everlasting glory, and the other to everlasting fire; but we do not know what is the reason for it: It is enough that God knoweth.

5. There is, likewise, great variety in the manner and time of God's bestowing his sanctifying grace, whereby he enables his children to give him their whole heart, which we can in no wise account for. We know not why he bestows this on some even before they ask for it; (some unquestionable instances of which we have seen;) on some after they have sought it but a few days; and yet permits other believers to wait for it perhaps twenty, thirty, or forty years; nay, and others, till a few hours, or even minutes, before their spirits return to him. For the various circumstances also which attend the fulfilling of that great promise, "I will circumcise thy heart, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul," God undoubtedly has reasons; but those reasons are generally hid from the children of men. Once more: some of those who are enabled to love God with all their heart and with all their soul, retain the same blessing, without any interruption, till they are carried to Abraham's bosom; others do not retain it, although they are not conscious of having grieved the Holy Spirit of God. This also we do not understand: We do not herein "know the mind of the Spirit."

IV

IV. Several valuable lessons we may learn from a deep consciousness of this our own ignorance. First, we may learn hence a lesson of humility; not "to think of ourselves," particularly with regard to our understanding, "more highly than we ought to think;" but "to think soberly;" being thoroughly convinced that we are not sufficient of

ourselves to think one good thought; that we should be liable to stumble at every step, to err every moment of our lives, were it not that we have "an anointing from the Holy One," which abideth "with us;" were it not that He who knoweth what is in man helpeth our infirmities; that "there is a spirit in man which giveth wisdom," and the inspiration of the Holy One which "giveth understanding." From hence we may learn, Secondly, a lesson of faith, of confidence in God. A full conviction of our own ignorance may teach us a full trust in his wisdom. It may teach us (what is not always so easy as one would conceive it to be) to trust the invisible God farther than we can see him! It may assist us in learning that difficult lesson, to "cast down" our own "imagination" (or reasonings rather, as the word properly signifies), to "cast down every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." There are at present two grand obstructions to our forming a right judgment of the dealings of God with respect to men. The one is, there are innumerable facts relating to every man which we do not and cannot know. They are, at present, hid from us, and covered from our search by impenetrable darkness. The other is, we cannot see the thoughts of men, even when we know their actions. Still we know not their intentions; and without this we can but ill judge of their outward actions. Conscious of this, "judge nothing before the time" concerning his providential dispensations; till he shall bring to light "the hidden things of darkness," and manifest "the thoughts and intent of the heart." From a consciousness of our ignorance we may learn, Thirdly, a lesson of resignation. We may be instructed to say at all times and in all instances, "Father, not as I will; but as thou wilt." This was the last lesson which our blessed Lord (as man) learnt while he was upon earth. He could go no higher than, "Not as I will, but as thou wilt," till he bowed his head and gave up the ghost. Let us also herein be made conformable to his death, that we may know the full "power of his resurrection!"

Copyright © 2011-2014 WordsOfWesley.com. All rights reserved.

Proper Cite: John Wesley. Sermon 69 "The Imperfection of Human Knowledge" in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson via WordsOfWesley.com (Accessed Sep 27, 2023)