

“3 Simple Rules for Living: Do Good”
Romans 12:9-21 and Matthew 22:34-40
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September 21, 2008

For those of you just joining us this morning, we are in the middle of a series exploring how we can live our lives more faithfully by using 3 rules that were spelled out by the 17th century founder of the Methodist movement, John Wesley. These rules, on the surface, sound simple. But as we reflect upon them for our lives today, we come to realize that as easy as they may sound, it is only through attention and discipline on our part, and through the grace that only God provides, that we can fully live them out in ways that transform our lives and transform the world.

We heard about the first rule last week during Rev. Jimmy Sherrod’s sermon. Do no harm. 3 small words that encompass a principle that is often counter-cultural to how we live our lives. Do no harm – the idea that in all situations, we are to avoid retributive justice and instead turn the other cheek as Jesus taught us. Not that we are to become a whipping post for those who seek to take advantage of others or walk all over us, but that we seek harmony in our relationships with others through the concept of restorative justice. The second general rule, which we will dive into more deeply in just a moment, is only 2 words. Do good. And the 3rd – originally phrased, “attend to the ordinances of God,” is the practicing of spiritual disciplines that create an environment in our lives that encourages and strengthens our relationship with God, helping us, as Dr. Parker will share next week, to “stay in love with God.” Do no harm. Do good. And stay in love with God. Simple on the surface, harder than they sound, and yet life changing when we live by them.

A few years ago there was a feel good campaign that gained a lot of attention across the country. It started out small, a phrase coined by a peace activist, went into print in the mid 90’s, grew a bit with the establishment of a charitable foundation, and then hit it big with the masses through none other than the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty. It was a trend that many jumped on board with, one that inspired countless individuals, one that touched many lives, because it got at the heart of something that is often missing in life as it is lived today. Life that is often filled with a little less certainty and stability than it was just a few decades ago.

On its surface, it’s a fantastic initiative - selfless and often anonymous acts, many done spontaneously, to help someone or brighten the day of an often unknown individual. Paying the toll at the toll both for the person behind you. Can’t do that with SMARTPASS, but you get the idea. Doubling the tip you leave at the restaurant. Dropping off a bag of groceries outside the door

of someone you know is struggling financially. Small gestures intended to bring cheer or help someone in need, with the thought that those helped, in turn, might one day do the same for someone else, creating a ripple effect of goodness across the land.

A great idea. Except, like most trends, a lot of the initial energy and momentum behind the movement, at least in the public consciousness, has evaporated – its 15 minutes of fame is over. It's not that the idea has fallen out of favor, not that people have stopped doing good things for others, it's just that they are probably doing things a little less randomly than they did at the height of the hype.

At its heart, this need to remind us to practice acts of kindness, to do good things for others, points to the fact that somehow, many of us are not quite connecting with what it means to live in relationship with one another. Most of us have been raised in homes and schools and churches and communities where we have been taught, beginning at an early age, that we are to do good. So, what happened? It shouldn't take an Oprah Winfrey to point out what we ought to be doing – should it? Looking around, though, it's a little easier - not ok - but easier, to understand why we might be a little hesitant to put ourselves out there.

We live in a stressed out, politically divided, highly litigious world. The financial soundness of our nation is teetering along a fine line, homes in our neighborhoods are undergoing foreclosure, our nation's reputation is under fire, our country continues to be hit hard by catastrophic storm after storm. What does it mean to do good when the continent of Africa is groaning under weight of AIDs and corrupt dictatorships, of slaughter and warfare that can only be categorized as genocidal; when the Middle East, in many areas, is like a road filled with landmines, just waiting for one misstep; when the poverty and lack of opportunity in many of our central American neighbors leads to desperate attempts to find employment here; when even here in our own nation's capital we've got those without health insurance, lack of affordable and decent housing, the closing of homeless shelters, drive by shootings, and just across the Potomac River, a reminder of how just 7 years ago terror was knocking on our door as our country's almost Camelot-like sense of security was shattered?

It's overwhelming. And so instead of being open and reaching out and doing all the good we are capable of...we turn inward. We draw our families a little closer, watch our finances a little more tightly, we hover over our children just a little bit more, and make sure our doors are locked. Sure, we still do some good, we take care of ourselves and those we love, those who are close to us. We even venture forth from time to time to participate in activities like Rebuilding Together or Habitat for Humanity. We might even head across the country or the seas to spend a week serving as a Volunteer in Mission. But then we return home, get back to work, and don't think about it

again until the next hurricane hits, or the next embassy is bombed, or a celebrity reminds us to plug into something that is missing from our lives.

Our lives are so harried, I think, that we tend to live more reactively than proactively. How do you even start to do good in a world that needs more good than any of us could possibly ever do? How do we do good, when doing good in the secular sense means doing nice things and expressing care and compassion, and doing good as a Christian takes it to a completely different level? Not only are we called to do good with care and compassion, but we are called to do it with love...love, as we heard in our scripture readings this morning, that is not just for those we like, but love for the often anonymous neighbor, and still harder yet, with love for those we find to easy to hate...our enemies.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is – the one thing that should be most important for our lives, the one thing we should make sure we always do. Jesus responded, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment.* And then he went on to say, *“And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’*

What Jesus did was he brought together two foundational principles - living in relationship with God and with one another. He drew from the prayer that is recited daily by faithful Jews even today, quoting the Shema, found in the Old Testament in Deuteronomy. “Hear O Israel; The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.” (Deut 6: 4- 5). And then he took things a step further, connecting love of God to love of neighbor as found in the book of Leviticus. “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 19:18).

Everything that we are to do, Jesus said, rests upon, or hangs upon love of God, and right on its heels, love of neighbor. This becomes the core of our very being, of whose we are and who we are, of how we live and what we do. We can't do good, truly do good, beyond nice deeds, unless this love is at the very center of our thoughts and actions. Without this love at our core, we are not fully compelled to do good in all the ways that we should because we fail to value others as God values them. Consequently, we can't live in proper community, in relationship with others, and ultimately, with God. We become disconnected.

John Wesley, who was an Anglican priest who never intended to start a denomination, recognized that as Christians, and as the church, there was often a disconnect between the holiness we are

called to through scripture and faith, and the way we live our lives. And so he devoted his life's work to preaching the good news of Jesus Christ and drawing those of faith into a relationship with God that would lead to not only professing faith with their words, but living in very practical and meaningful ways that would transform the believer and transform the world.

But Wesley also understood that this just doesn't randomly happen. It takes intentionality and discipline, along with the grace of God. To help people keep on track in their spiritual journey, Wesley encouraged groups of Christians to gather together each week in what he called societies – groups that came together, outside of the regular Anglican Church services, for fellowship, preaching, praying, and the singing of hymns. As these groups grew, though, it became more difficult to interface with everyone, to make sure they were staying on the right path. So Wesley created another layer of small groups that functioned as a subset of the societies. These were called class meetings. These meetings would take place each week, allowing members check in. "How is it with your soul?" would be the first question asked by the class leader. Members of the class would share how they were doing in prayer and the study of scripture, in the areas where they might have struggled, as well as how they persevered in the face of temptation over the past week. As the movement continued to grow, Wesley penned the General Rules to maintain order in the Methodist societies and classes. Did these groups and the individuals in them, "do no harm?" Did they "do good?" Did they "attend to the ordinances of God" – things like the study of scripture, fasting, prayer, and the receiving of communion?

Key to Wesley's direction for the Methodist movement was the underlying foundation of the theology of Christian perfection that Dr. Parker preached about a few weeks ago. Not perfection in performance, but perfection in one's intent – a holiness of heart and life. Wesley believed that the life of each individual Christian could grow, with God's help, to a point where the love of God, or perfect love, became the driving motivator of one's faith, life and actions. This love is lived out through the words, actions, and deeds of the faithful – lived out in the personal experience of individuals and communities of faith. It allows us to reflect God's love to all, including our enemies, rising above the bitterness and anger that too often ensnare us. While do not allow ourselves to be victimized by those who would seek to harm us, but instead love them and value them in their imperfect state, just as God loves us in ours. It motivates us to do good to all people, at all times, in whatever ways we are capable. To not only react, but to be proactive, sharing the love of God in every aspect of our life.

So how do we do good? Yes, it's serving on a mission trip, or feeding the homeless here in our shelter. Yes, it's visiting someone in the hospital, or advocating for the rights of a group that has been marginalized in our community. Yes, it's providing the quick fix to meet a need, but it's also moving beyond to provide the skills to be independent in the future. Yes, it is giving a ride to

someone unable to drive anymore, or ministering to those who are incarcerated. Bishop Job writes, that “Every act and every word must pass through the love and will of God and there be measured to discover if its purpose does indeed bring good and goodness to all it touches.” (pg. 38)

But it is more than just the deeds we do in reaction to the world, it’s more than just the deeds we do when we come upon random opportunities. It becomes a more proactive way of life, where the good that is God’s love becomes the shaping force for our lives, transforming us, and transforming the world. It is when, as Bishop Job writes, we are “living in the healing, loving, redeeming, forming and guiding light and presence of God which brings the redemption, healing, transformation and guidance that is so desperately needed (48-49)” [in the world].

It’s not an easy rule to live by, these 2 small words. Do good. But with God’s grace, and with the means to receive that grace which Dr. Parker will preach about next week, we can. Thanks be to God.