



2/16/2020

“Stay in Love with God”

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 30:15-20; Psalm 18:1-3a; John 21:15-17, Colossians 2:6-7

Series: “Three Simple Rules”

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Theme: Living in a complex, hectic world often filled with selfish ambition, contention and strife, we are once again called to a simple approach to living as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

We have been considering the so-called “Three Simple Rules” of John Wesley, which can change our lives and transform our world. The first is “Do no harm.” The second is “Do good” and the third is “Stay in love with God.”

A couple of days ago, and even for our church fellowship brunch today, many have or will celebrate Valentine’s Day. And while it is a time of celebrating romantic love for many, it is also a time for many of celebrating deeper kinds of love as well – like that of a parent, a child or a sibling. It is a love which is truly unconditional yet desiring the best for and of another.

When I was growing up, the first bible verse that I memorized was John 3:16, in the King James Version. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

It was especially the realization of these words, and God’s love for me, which changed my heart, my mind, and my life. In thinking of these words, and what they came to mean to me, in my early twenties I made bookmarks to hand out to others, which read: “God loves you. Why not love Him back?”

And in remembering what Jesus himself said was the greatest of all commandments, I had a greater understanding of why some of the Jews in my neighborhood dressed as they did or had little boxes or placards on their doorways.

They reflect the words of God to the people of Israel through the prophet Moses, found in the Book of Deuteronomy (6:4-9 NIV):

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”



So, as we consider our third simple rule, “Stay in love with God,” we can realize that it is certainly a heart-felt love of being in relationship with God.

It should also be understood that . . .

† Staying in love with God requires attention to and nurturing the relationship

As Psalm 105:4 says, “Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.”

And as Paul wrote to the Colossians (2:6-7), “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

As Rueben Job writes in his book on these rules, John Wesley said that in order to stay in love with God, we must practice what he called ordinances, which keep the relationship between God and humans “vital, alive, and growing.” “Wesley names public worship of God, the Lord’s Supper (Holy Communion), private and family prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study, and fasting as essential to a faithful life.” (Three Simple Rules, by Rueben P. Job; 2007, Abingdon Press)

I confess that I’m not as faithful with that last one as I used to be. :)

We have considered these practices in depth during the season of Lent a few years ago. And they are always worth keeping in mind and practice. Job says of them, “While we may have different names for our essential spiritual disciplines, these practices can become a life-giving source of strength and guidance for us. Let me ask, which practices, and which ways, do you nurture or develop your love for God?”

† Benefits of Spiritual Disciplines/Practices

Job says that, “Spiritual disciplines teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves and larger than that which the world values as ultimate.” (ibid, p.54)

As Joan Chittester puts it, “All we have in this life is life. Things – the cars, the houses, the educations, the jobs, the money – come and go, turn to dust between our fingers, change and disappear . . . the secret of life . . . is that it must be developed from the inside out” (Illuminated Life, Orbis Books, 2000; p. 14) (ibid.).

“Living in the presence of and harmony with the living God who is made known in Jesus Christ and companions us in the Holy Spirit is to live life from the inside out.” says Job. It is to find our moral direction, our wisdom, our courage, our strength to live faithfully from the One who



authored us, called us, sustains us, and sends us into the world as witnesses who daily practice the way of living with Jesus.” (ibid.)

Spiritual disciplines also “keep us in that healing, redeeming presence and power of God that forms and transforms each of us more and more in the image of the One we seek to follow. We may name our spiritual disciplines differently, but we too must find our way of living and practicing those disciplines that will keep us in love with God – practices that will help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God’s slightest whisper of direction and receive God’s promised presence and power every day and in every situation.” (ibid. p.55)

The bible is filled with examples, like the prophet Elijah, who experienced God’s presence and direction in the stillness within, while the forces of life and nature raged around him. (1 Kings 19:12 NIV)

“It is in these practices,” Job says, “that we learn of God’s love for us. It is where our love for God is nurtured and sustained. Incorporating these practices in our way of living will keep us in love with God and assure us of God’s love for us in this world and in the world to come.” (ibid.)

In that way, I believe, it is like nurturing any kind of loving relationship -- spending the time and energy, doing what is needed to let the other know what they mean to us, by our presence, listening, speaking, caring, and demonstrating our love for one another.

And just as that may be construed differently for different couples and relationships, I agree with Job when he says that “This simple rule will be construed differently for each of us because each of us is unique. But there are some common essentials for all of us,” such as a those just described. (ibid.)

† The Example of Jesus (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15)

As we seek to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, let’s always remember to follow the example of Jesus. The gospel of Luke (2:52 NRSV) tells us that from childhood “. . . Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” No doubt he must have learned from an early age, encouraged by his parents and others, how important it was to stay close to God if he was to know and understand who he truly was, what his purpose and mission was, and how to fulfill it in the world.

His love of God was truly that of a son with a father, acknowledging that from his early teen years that he was to be about his Father’s business, or in his Father’s house, as he said in the Temple (Luke 2:49). And later Jesus prayed to God as “Abba” (Matthew 14:36), which is an affectionate Aramaic term for father.



Likewise, the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the early believers in Rome (Romans 8:15 NRSV) . . . For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

Before and during every step and turn of his earthly ministry – from the forty days he spent in the wilderness before beginning that ministry, to the final hours of his earthly life on the cross – Jesus continued to stay connected with God in prayer and other ways.

So, as Jesus, as Paul, as others, we develop that loving relationship with God and Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit within us. We stay in love with God, knowing and feeling God's love for us.

In what ways do you follow Jesus' example?

† The Question Asked of Peter . . . and Us (John 21:15ff.)

When we look at Jesus on the cross, we realize that though thousands flocked to hear him preach or witness him perform miracles, only a few of his closest family, friends or followers stayed with him to the end. And even Peter, his closest follower, denied knowing Jesus; not once, but three times when his life was in danger. For the most part, the world would just go on as before – at least for a time.

"His message of love was rejected by a world in search of power, efficiency, and control."
Rueben Job says. (ibid. p. 57)

When the risen Jesus appeared again to his disciples at the Sea of Galilee, he provided them with fish to eat. When they had finished eating, Jesus asked Simon Peter but one question, three times, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter replied affirming his love for Christ. And three times Jesus instructed him to feed or tend his followers, lambs and sheep as he called them.

Job says that question asked by Jesus "reveals a great deal about the essentials of our relationship with God ... Staying in love with God was the primary issue of a faithful life then, and it is today. For from such a life of love for God will flow the goodness and love of God to the world. It can be no other way. One who is deeply in love will be constantly formed and transformed by that relationship. And such a transformed life will be a natural channel of God's goodness, power, and presence in the world." (ibid.)

The late Bishop Reuben Job goes on to say, "And while staying in love with God involves prayer, worship, study and the Lord's Supper, it also involves feeding the lambs, tending the sheep, and providing for the needs of others (John 21:15-16)." (ibid. p 58)

As he puts it, doing these things are "signs of love that we exchange with God. And they are signs of love that the world can understand." (ibid.) These are the signs and expressions of our



loving relationship with God, which we demonstrate through our missions like the Rotating Homeless Shelter, the Paris Foundation Meals, and others.

As you may know, this passage is especially close to me. For as I read through the gospels each night before going to bed in my later teen and early adult years, praying and meditating on each passage as I followed Jesus, I finally came to this one in John. As Peter had, I felt Jesus directly asking me this question. And after I responded, “Yes, Lord. I love you.” I also felt Jesus saying to me the words he said to Peter after his response. “Come. Follow me.” These were the words that led me to follow him to Wyoming, Iowa, Virginia, back to Pennsylvania and here over these past forty years.

Friends, your call and response may not lead you to live and serve in ten different places, but as Rueben Job says, “The question to Peter becomes the question to each of us, ‘Do you love me?’”

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A Challenging Way to Live – for Reflection & Application

Yes, this way of living Jesus calls us to can be challenging at times, yet it is part of the new and abundant life which Jesus came to give (John 10:10) as we accept the amazing grace and love of God in Christ!

Disciples of Jesus have great freedom in Christ. Yet we are also often called to action and restraint as we stay in love with God and seek to live a life of faithfulness, fidelity, and integrity, says Job. (ibid. p. 61)

But the blessings are many and great! As you and I practice these three “Simple Rules”, your world, our world, becomes transformed – even if it is one soul and one relationship at a time.

May God bless you and keep you. May the LORD smile upon you and be gracious unto you. May the LORD lift up his face upon you and give you peace, love, and joy everlasting!
In Christ Jesus, Amen.