

As we discussed last week every day we are faced with many decisions as we deal with all the demands and problems of daily life. And on top of all this there is our desire and responsibility as Christians to live in faithful service and obedience to God. How do we do that; how do we live faithful to our commitment to Jesus Christ; how do we strive to be more like Him each and every day? John Wesley saw the need to provide some simple guidance for living the Christian life; so he gave the early Methodists three simple rules. They are not long complex rules, but simple ones that are easy to remember, yet challenging to practice: do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

Now Wesley did not make up these rules by himself; they are based on the guiding principles and commandments given to us by God. Last Sunday we learned that the one guiding principle God gave His people was to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. This command was to be recited by the people of Israel every day and taught to their children, which is not a bad idea for us to consider doing today. The command to love God is the guiding principle for all of God's people.

However, in an effort to be faithful, the Jewish religious leaders and legal experts took this one principle and the Ten Commandments and expanded them into over 613 laws. When Jesus came He tried once again to simplify things. When asked which of all the laws and regulations that the Jewish legal experts had created over the years was the most important, Jesus reduced all their laws down to two simple, but critical statements: "love God and love your neighbor as yourself." What Jesus was saying was that loving God cannot just be expressed in our words to God and the attitudes and feelings of our heart towards God; love for God must be lived out in our relationships with one another in very real and tangible ways. Our love for God must be put into acts of love towards others.

The Apostle John understood this when he wrote in First John that to love God means that we love others and loving others means that we reach out to help them in real ways. This is the basis for Wesley's second rule – Do Good. It's not enough for us to simply do no harm as we discussed last Sunday, we have to be proactive and take God's love for us to the next level and use that love to help others. Nice words will never take the place of good deeds, and no amount of talk of Christian love will ever take the place of a kindly action to someone in need. So doing good is putting God's love into action.

Doing good is loving our neighbor as ourselves and the Bible is full of passages that affirm this teaching. Let's look at one of these from the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 27 through 36.

Read Luke 6:27-36

Here Jesus is telling us that loving others, even our enemies, actually means doing something good for them. Loving others is not a feeling or emotion; it is helping meet their real needs and offering them grace and mercy. Jesus said the same thing in John 13:34-35 which is the basis for the song we just sang: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And we hear this teaching affirmed in the passage that Ken/Lisa read to us earlier from Romans 12, where the Apostle Paul also states that our love needs to be extended to others in very real ways. John Wesley made sure people understood the depth of this call to do good by telling people that not only should we do good but we should: "Do all the good we can. By all the means we can. In all the ways we can. In all the places we can. At all the times we can. To all the people we can. As long as we can."

This statement begins to answer some of our questions about doing good. Such as where do we begin; what are the boundaries? If we were to ask who is to be the recipient of our good deeds? The answer is everybody. If we were to ask where should we do good, just in the church or in the community and schools and homes as well? The answer is that we are to do good everywhere. Do we do good by just giving our money or do we give our time and talents and prayers as well. The answer is that we use all the means we can; we do whatever we can to do good. Are we ever able to stop doing good? The answer is no, we do it as long as we can. What Wesley is saying is that for a Christian the call to love others is a lifelong commitment.

Doing good, like doing no harm, is a proactive way of living. We should not have to wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide help. We should make a commitment that we will always come down on the side of doing good to all in every situation and in every way we can.

There is no limit to the love that we are to show God and others, because there is no limit to the love that God has shown us through His Son Jesus Christ who died to set us free from sin. Jesus set the example for us; we are to do all the good we can at all times and in all the places and by all the means to all we can.

Now this brings up the question: what are some of these good deeds that I am supposed to do? A man finds himself at the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter tells him that he must first meet certain criteria before he can enter. Peter asked the man if he was religious, attended church. No. Was he generous, giving money to the poor and charities? No. Did he do any good deeds; help his neighbor? No; Peter was getting concerned and said: "Look, everybody does something nice sometime. Work with me, I'm trying to help you. Think!" The man says: "Well, there was this old lady. I came out of the store and found her surrounded by a dozen Hell's Angels. They had taken her purse and were shoving her around, taunting and abusing her. I got so mad,

threw my bags down, fought through the crowd, and got her purse back. I then helped her to her feet and went up the biggest, meanest biker and hit him in the face.” “Wow,” replied Peter, “That’s impressive. When did that happen?” “Oh, about 10 minutes ago.”

Of course, we could start making a list of possible good deeds; we all love lists. Even though Jesus gave us a list of some good things should do for others in Matthew 25 such as feeding the hungry, giving clothes to the naked, and visiting those who are sick and in prison, I don’t think Jesus ever wanted us to take this command to love our neighbor and turn it into a comprehensive check list to follow. I believe that Jesus wants us to make this a way of life.

Doing good should be our guiding principle. In every situation we find ourselves we need to instinctively ask ourselves, what is the most good that I can do? Am I loving my neighbor the best way I can? If this rule becomes part of our lives and if it truly guides our actions then we will find ourselves doing more and more good deeds without having to check a list, or even thinking about it. This simple rule reminds us that while following God’s laws and commandments are important, what is ultimately important is allowing our hearts and lives to be shaped and guided by love; a love for God that turns into a love for others.

However, we need to be careful that our motives are right as we follow this simple rule of doing good. We should never do anything that calls attention to ourselves or expect to get any praise or recognition for our efforts. If we are motivated by pride and ego, which is the desire to be recognized, then our actions stop being good and become sinful. Our actions should always be done out of love and obedience to God.

Jesus warns us about this in the Sermon on the Mount in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. Listen to a paraphrase from the *Message*: “Be especially careful when you are trying to do good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity, but it won’t make you a saint.” When we do good it should be done as quietly as possible behind the scenes so that we aren’t seeking any kind of recognition or reward for ourselves but just trying to do good for others.

In addition, we often don’t know how our good deeds may have impacted others. For example, a farmer went to the market to purchase grain. He put the bags of grain in his wagon, and headed home. As the wagon rode along the rocky road, one of the bags became untied, and the grain was scattered along the roadside. The birds picked up some of the grain and flew off with it, and dropped it in distant places. Some was blown in different directions by the winds. Thus the farmer went on for miles, without knowing what was happening. The scattered seeds took root and the next summer there was grain all along the roadside. The farmer was unaware that this growth was because of his lost grain. And so it is with good deeds that we

often perform unknowingly; we are not aware of the good we have done and the impact we have had on the lives of others. And that's the way it is supposed to be.

We also need to be careful that following this rule is not some vain attempt to earn our way to heaven; making points with God, like the Jewish leaders were trying to do at the time of Jesus. Sometimes when we first become a Christian we have this notion that we need to repay God for all He has done for us. The truth is that there is nothing that we can ever do which will make God love us more than He does right now, and there is nothing that we can do to earn the salvation that God has already freely given us in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2:8-9, the Apostle Paul writes: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast."

One Sunday morning after the worship service a woman came up to the pastor and thanked him for the encouraging sermon he had preached. In response he said: "Don't thank me, thank the Lord." To which she replied: "Well, I thought about that, but it wasn't quite that good."

So our salvation is not dependent on any of our good works; and we aren't saved or loved by God because of what we do. God's love and grace are freely given. Now somebody may ask: "So why do we need to make sure we follow this rule; why do we need to do good?" Well, for one thing it's what God calls us to do. The Apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:10 – "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Did you hear that; we are created to do good; it's in our DNA.

From the very beginning God has been doing good; thus we who are created in His image are also called to do good. Because of the love and grace that God has shown us, we in turn are to show this same love and grace to others. Billy Graham said that "unless our belief in God causes us to help our fellow man, our faith stands condemned." Doing good should be about our response to God and His love for us; nothing more, nothing less.

This way of living will require a careful and continual assessment of our life and the circumstances around us. It will require an even more bold and radical step than not doing harm to those who may disagree with us and even seek to harm us. By following this rule we are committing to practice agape love; seeking the best for others no matter what they have done to us. Now by others, I'm not just talking about our family, friends and close associates; I'm talking about everybody we encounter each and every day, especially those people we don't like or want to associate with. This can be tough and you may think that it is impossible. But remember, nothing is impossible for God. If we walk in faith and trust in Him, He will give us the grace and strength necessary to reach out in love to all, even those we dislike.

God gives us opportunities every day to put this rule into practice; we just need to keep our eyes open and be willing to let the Spirit guide us. Hopefully, we as a church are providing

many different opportunities for you to serve such as the Pantry, the Community of Hope, Feed New Mexico Kids, Christmas Child, and work projects such as at University Heights UMC. But many opportunities come unexpected such as helping someone change a flat tire, carrying groceries for someone at Smith's, taking a meal to a sick neighbor, sending a card to a friend, listening to someone who is discouraged, and I could go on and on. The point is – look for opportunities to show God's love by doing good. A sign in an office stated: "Enjoy life. This is not a dress rehearsal." This is a great reminder that today is the best day to seize the moment and live life to the fullest in service to God. This coming week, look for ways to do good.

John Wesley lived to be 89 years old. Do you know what he was doing the day that he died? Earlier that day, he was serving soup and bread to people on the streets who had nothing. And after he finished, he walked home, laid his head on his pillow and breathed his last breath. He went home to Lord knowing that he had done all the good he could to all the people he could. Will we be able to say the same as we look back over our lives?

If you want to grow closer to God; if you want to be more like Jesus; and if you want to find fulfillment in life, then follow these simple rules: do no harm and do good. You can't go wrong with this advice. Amen