

This morning let's conclude our discussion of John Wesley's Three Simple Rules. As we have discussed over the past two Sundays, when Jesus was asked which of all the many laws and rules that the Jewish religious leaders and legal experts had created over the years was the most important, He gave us two simple, but profound statements: "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus is telling us that our love for God should not just be expressed in our words and feelings towards God, but must be lived out in our relationships with one another. The first two simple rules deal with our love for others: do no harm and do good. This morning let's look at the third rule: stay in love with God.

Following the Resurrection, Jesus made numerous appearances to His disciples. One of these is recorded in the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John. For some reason several of the disciples, led by Peter, decided to go fishing in the Sea of Galilee. However, they didn't catch anything until Jesus who was standing on the shore told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat. They caught so many fish that the nets almost broke. When they got the boat and fish ashore, they found that Jesus had prepared breakfast for them. What a sight that must have been; the recently Resurrected Messiah, the Son of God, cooking breakfast!

There are many ways to look at this story, but this morning I want us to focus on what happened after the breakfast. Jesus takes Peter aside for a private conversation. Now remember Jesus and Peter had not been alone since Peter denied knowing Jesus three times on the night that Jesus was arrested. Listen to the conversation as recorded in the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel of John, verses 15 through 19.

Read John 21:15-19

Three times Jesus asked Peter "Do you love me?" and three times Peter replied yes. This question "do you love me" reveals a great deal about our relationship with God. Staying in love with God was a primary goal of the disciples back then and should definitely be our goal today. Because from such a life of love for God will flow the desire to do no harm and to do good; this is the only way it can be. Because of our relationship and love for the Lord, we are changed and become a channel for His love and presence in the world.

We love God because He first loved us. One of best stories in the Bible that demonstrates the love that God has for each of us is the Parable of the Prodigal Son found in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In this story, the younger son asked his father for his share of the inheritance and left for a far country where he wasted all his money on wine, women and song. Without any money, family or friends, he is forced to take a job tending pigs. As he examined his desperate situation in the pig pen, the Bible tells us that "he came to his senses," and

decided to return home to his father. I love this verse because hopefully each of us at some time will come to our senses and realize that we cannot live without God.

The young man heads home and in verse 20 we get a glimpse of God's love for each of us: "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." This tells us that the father had been waiting and searching the horizon every day in hope of seeing his son coming back home. The boy might have been gone from the home, but he was never out of his father's heart. So, it is with us and God; He is always waiting for us to come back home.

Once there were a widow and her son who had to live in an attic. Years before, she had married against her parents' wishes and had gone with her husband to live in a foreign land. He had proved irresponsible and unfaithful, and after a few years he died without leaving any provisions for her and their child. Somehow, she managed to get by on the bare necessities of life. One day the mailman knocked at the attic door. The mother recognized the handwriting on the letter that he brought and with trembling fingers broke the seal. Inside there were a check and a slip of paper with just two words: "Come home."

Every day God is searching the horizon for us, longing for us to come back home, to come closer to Him, to think about Him, and to talk with Him. And when we do, even though we may have drifted far away because of the poor choices that we have made; God's love runs out and welcomes us home. God's love not only pursues us and forgives us, but when it connects with us, it changes us. When we begin to understand just how much God loves us, it melts our hearts and begins to transform our lives so that we can become the person He wants us to be.

In the 12th chapter of Hebrews, we are told that living out our faith should be like a race where we love God so much that we are willing to run after Him constantly. So, let me ask you, how much do you love God? What are you willing to do to stay in love with God; remember love is an action? Staying in love with God means that we keep running the race of faith and according to Hebrews the one thing that helps us in this race is staying focused on the cross.

If you have ever had any doubt about God's love for you, then look to the cross. God loves us so much that He was willing to send His Son Jesus to die for us so that we could experience forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. Have you ever thought of the cross as a symbol of love? The horizontal arm of the cross shows us that our love needs to reach out to those around us in very real and tangible ways by doing no harm and doing good. It means that we don't do things that could hurt other people like gossip; it also means that we will do everything we can in every way we can and in every place we can to build people up.

Then there is also a vertical arm on the cross. And this represents our relationship with God and our need to stay in love with Him. We all know from experience that if relationships are to

be maintained and grow some effort is necessary on our part. There are certain spiritual disciplines that we need to practice if we are to stay in touch with God and grow in our relationship with Him such as prayer, reading the Bible, participating in Bible study, worship and communion.

Now think about prayer; prayer is basically a conversation with God. It is talking to God and then being quiet so we can listen to God. Any relationship, whether it is a marriage, or the relationship with our children or friends, needs conversation. We need to be able to talk with one another and share our hopes, dreams and needs with each other and when we do this, our relationships grow. No healthy relationship can survive without conversation; no marriage can survive without good, open communication; no family can remain strong without sharing and listening to one another; and every friendship needs times when we can speak and where we can sit together in silence and the same is true in our relationship with God. Someone once described his prayer life as “staying in touch with the home office.”

A stranger approached the pastor after the worship service and asked: “Can you pray for my hearing?” The pastor knelt beside him and placed his hands over the man’s ears and said a passionate, earnest prayer. “How’s your hearing now?” the pastor asked. Looking surprised, the man replied: “Well, it’s not until tomorrow morning, at the courthouse.”

By now I hope that all of you know my position on a daily quiet time. I believe that it is essential to our spiritual growth to take time every day to be alone with God in prayer and reading the Bible. I started this practice over thirty-five years ago, and now it is as much a part of my daily life as eating and sleeping. I can’t start my day without spending some quiet time with the Lord. This is one of the best habits that you will ever develop. Not only is prayer time essential, but taking time each day to read God’s Word is critical for getting through each day. Dwight L. Moody said that when he prayed, he was talking to God, but when he read the Bible, God was talking to him, and it was more important for God to speak and for him to listen.

Other books were given to us for information, but the Bible was given to us for transformation, to change our lives. That’s why we not only need to read the Bible, but study it in detail. As we read and study the Bible, we should ask the who, what and why questions when reading a passage, and then see how we can apply what we have learned to our daily lives. As Methodists, we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that it is to be interpreted based on our tradition, experience and common sense. Because each of us comes from different religious backgrounds and experiences in life, we can each read the same passage and yet have different interpretations. And that’s the beauty of the Bible; it’s a living document.

Charles Spurgeon, the great British preacher, said that nobody ever outgrows the Bible; the book widens and deepens with our years. And that is one thing that has fascinated me over the years. You know you can read a book and the subject, characters, and ending will always remain the same. But not so with the Bible; it changes and evolves as we go through the experiences and situations of life. I can read a scripture passage today that I have read a hundred times over the years, and I will continue to find new meanings and applications for my daily life as the situations in my life change. As things happen in our life, God opens up the Bible to us in new ways to help us navigate this highway of life. It speaks to each of us differently depending on where we are in our spiritual growth and relationship with God. If you are not currently involved in a Bible study, please take advantage of the classes we are offering.

In Hebrews 10:25 members of the Early Church were told to not give up meeting together as some were in the habit of doing. You know it is real easy to get out of the habit of regular attendance in church. It can start with a small excuse and then become a habit in itself until we have distanced ourselves from God and the Church. And habits are hard to break. For example, one lady called her best friend and said happily: "I've finally cured my husband of biting his nails." Her friend asked her how she was able to break him of this bad habit after so many years, and she replied: "I hid his teeth."

There is no such thing as "Lone Ranger Christianity;" we need the fellowship of other believers. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus promised: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." Things happen when we come together. A book that I recently read said that when Jesus shows up, anything can happen. God's Spirit moves among His worshipping people. Worship is a stairway on which there is movement in both directions; God comes to us, and we go to God. It was God's plan from the beginning that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ be joined together in a spiritual fellowship.

One night as the famous Bible teacher F.B. Meyer stood on the bridge of a ship approaching land, he wondered how the crew knew when and how to safely steer to the dock. It was a stormy night, and visibility was poor. Meyer, standing on the bridge and peering through the widow, asked: "Captain, how do you know when to turn the ship into this narrow harbor?" The captain replied: "Do you see those three red lights on the shore? When they are all in a straight line, I go right in." Worship helps us align our lives with God's will for us; it gives us a sense of direction and purpose.

And the final way that Wesley identified for us to stay in love with God is in participating regularly in Holy Communion. It is in the breaking of the bread that we experience God's amazing grace, and it is in the receiving of the cup that we receive God's much needed forgiveness. Just as we are united with the Church and fellow believers in our baptism, so is our relationship cemented and renewed at the Lord's Table.

While staying in love with God involves prayer, worship, Bible study, and the Lord's Supper, it also involves feeding the lambs, tending the sheep, and providing for the needs of others. Remember that Jesus said that He came not to be served but to serve. He set the example for us to follow. Saint Teresa of Avila wrote: "Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now." We are called to be His instruments for spreading the Good News through acts of kindness and service. When we love Jesus, we are committed to living our lives in such a way that the world around us can catch a glimpse of Jesus' character and love. In serving, we do no harm and we do good.

We have been given three simple rules for living the Christian life: do no harm, do good and stay in love with God. They are simple and easy to remember, yet are challenging to put into practice. This morning Jesus is asking each one of us the same question He asked Peter on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: "Do you love me? Do you truly love me?" If your answer is yes, then make these three simple rules part of your life; let them become your roadmap for living the Christian life and for growing closer to the Lord each and every day. Amen