

Think about how many decisions you make each and every day. When the alarm goes off, you have to decide whether to get out of bed or to hit the snooze button for an extra 10 minutes of sleep. Then you have to decide what you are going to wear and what you are going to have for breakfast. I don't think anybody would disagree that our lives are full of choices. Just get a shopping cart and go down the aisles in Smith's or Costco, and look at all the different brands to choose from. Or go to a local restaurant like Olive Garden and look at the different options on the menu. Decisions, decisions, decisions.

Take for example a fictional story that I found on the internet about a potential decision that Bill Gates had to make. He dies and meets God. God tells him: "Bill, I don't know whether to send you to heaven or hell. After all, you have helped society by putting a computer in nearly every home, but you also created that awful Windows system. I'm going to do something I have never done before; I'm going to let you decide your place in eternity."

So, God lets Bill take a peek at both places. Bill was amazed at what he saw in hell: white beaches, beautiful men and women playing in the water and having fun. He told God that if this was hell, he couldn't wait to see heaven. In heaven, he saw puffy white clouds on a beautiful blue sky with angels playing harps and singing. Bill thought for a moment and decided that hell appeared to be more fun, so he told God that he chose hell. "As you wish," God said.

Two weeks later, God decided to check on Bill. He found him shackled to a wall, screaming amidst the hot flames in a dark cave, being tortured by demons with pitchforks. "How are you doing?" God asked. In anguish, Bill replied: "This is awful; this is not what I expected. What happened to the white beach with all the beautiful women?" "Oh, that," said God, "That was the screen saver!"

Now we may not have simple rules to guide us in social and economic decisions, but we do have simple rules that can guide us in our faith. In the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament, God gave us one simple rule: "To love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength." This rule, known as the Shema, was to be recited every day by the Jewish people and it was the one guiding principle that was to direct every decision that God's people made. Unfortunately, we human beings often think we know more than God. So, over the years, the Jewish religious leaders took this simple rule and the Ten Commandments, and expanded them into 613 laws. It seems that we have a tendency to take something simple and make it really complicated.

For example, there is an urban legend that during the heat of the space race in the 1960's, NASA decided it needed a ballpoint pen that could write in the zero gravity confines of its space capsules. After considerable research and development, the Astronaut Pen was developed at a

cost of \$1 million. The pen worked and has also enjoyed some modest success as a novelty item back here on earth. However, the Soviet Union, faced with the same problem, just used a pencil!

During Jesus' time, the Pharisees and legal experts took great pride in their rules and used them in an attempt to earn their salvation and to put God in their debt. One time a lawyer approached Jesus and asked Him which of all the rules was the most important. Listen to Jesus' response in the 12th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, verses 28 through 34.

Read Mark 12:28-34

When Jesus was asked which of all their many rules and laws was the most important, Jesus took the Ten Commandments and all the rules that the legal experts had created, and reduced them down to two simple, but profound statements: love God and love your neighbor. Here we have the foundation and instruction for living the Christian life. It is easy to comprehend, but very challenging to do. In these words, lie the secret to living life to the fullest and in service to God.

However, as I said before, we have a tendency to complicate things. We will take the simplest thing and make it more difficult by creating detailed guidelines and instructions. We love to make rules. We do it in our everyday lives, the church and the government. If you have never worked in government, you don't know what bureaucracy is; the government has succeeded in regulating common sense out of life.

However, we as Christians and the Church are just as guilty. We have taken these two simple statements, love God and love neighbor, and made them so complicated and complex that we struggle doing them. Jesus tried to simplify things for us, but well-intended Christian leaders, scholars and theologians have come up with so many different interpretations and opinions that we are right back to where our Jewish brothers and sisters were when Jesus was originally asked which was most important. Of course, His answer would be the same today as it was back then: love God and love neighbor.

When Judy and I were driving back and forth to Socorro, we liked to listen to a CD of Gaither music. The lyrics of one of the songs that the choir and Drew sang earlier goes like this: "It's not complicated; don't need a lot of rules, this is all you'll need to know. Loving God, loving each other, making music with my friends; loving God, loving each other, and the story never ends."

John Wesley understood the need to provide some simple guidance for living the Christian life. He understood that all the structures and rules of the church may be more of a hindrance than a help in striving to become more like Jesus in our daily lives. I think that he would appreciate our modern phrase "KISS" – Keep It Simple Stupid! So, Wesley came up with three simple rules

that everybody can remember and hopefully strive for: Do No Harm, Do Good and Stay in Love with God.

These three rules have the power to change our lives and even the world. Although they have been around since 1700, few people have tried to live by them. Starting this morning and for the next two Sundays, I want to discuss each one in detail and see how we can apply them to our daily lives. So, this morning let's start with the first one: "Do No Harm."

Now this is a simple rule that my grandchildren were taught in pre-school and kindergarten. Remember the book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*: share everything, play fair and don't hit people. Unfortunately, we as adults have quickly forgotten these words of wisdom and need to be reminded again and again to play fair.

To help us understand what Wesley means by doing no harm, let's look at two scripture texts from Romans 12:14-19 and Romans 13:8-10.

Read Romans 12:14-19 and 13:8-10

Romans 13 lists some of the things that we know are wrong and hopefully, we never do such as murder, adultery, and stealing. These definitely harm others and impact those around them. But there are many other less obvious ways we can hurt others, such as with our words. Remember the old saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?" Right, we have all been hurt at some time by someone else's unkind remarks. There's some wonderful guidance concerning this in James 1:19: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." The *Message* provides an interesting paraphrase: "Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear." How many times have we wished that we had followed this guidance?

James is telling us that we should be quick to hear the reason and truth on both sides of a disagreement, and then be slow to speak, and when we do speak, let there be no anger. Just think how much better this world would be if we followed this advice in our everyday lives, the political world and the church? If we are to control our words, then we must first control our emotions. How many times have we said something in the heat of an argument that we later regretted? Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech that you will ever regret.

When James wrote this advice, communication between people was only face to face. However, modern technology has amplified the significance of this guidance. Every day you hear about somebody getting into trouble because of a comment that they posted on Facebook, twitter or email. In this world of instant communication, we have forgotten the old advice of taking a few deep breaths and cooling off before responding to a comment or

situation. There's an old saying: "a spoken word and a thrown stone cannot be recalled." The modern version of this is: "a tweet, a text or an email cannot be retrieved."

I remember the advice of a former boss who told me that if you had the urge to write a nasty letter, then go ahead and write it. But put it in the top right-hand drawer of your desk and wait three days before sending it. If after three days, you still felt it was the right thing to do, then send it. As you might expect, most of these letters were torn up before the three-day deadline.

Now we can't talk about hurtful words without discussing one of my pet peeves – gossiping. Conversation is an exercise of the mind while gossip is merely an exercise of the tongue. In my lifetime, I have not found anything as destructive and hurtful to relationships among families, friends and churches as gossip. Reputations, friendships, marriages, and businesses have been ruined due to an idle tongue. Unfortunately, there are people who just live for the opportunity to spread rumors and gossip. They literally feed on the bad news, problems and crises in other people's lives. Their favorite opening lines are: "Did you hear about so-and-so; it's none of my business, but; and finally, I'm just telling it like it is." In Matthew 18:20, Jesus said that when two or three are gathered together in His name, He is there. But I have observed that when two or three are off to the side whispering, they are usually up to no good and somebody's good name is being trashed.

I may have shared this story with you before, but it illustrates the point that I'm trying to make. There was a woman named Mildred who was the church gossip and self-appointed enforcer of the church's moral standards. She was always sticking her nose into the private lives of the congregation. Of course, the congregation did not appreciate it, but feared her enough to remain silent. However, she made a mistake when she accused George, a new member, of being an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She told George and others that anyone seeing it there knew what he was up to. George, a man of few words, just stared at her for a moment and then walked away. He didn't explain, defend or deny; he said nothing. However, later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house, and left it there all night! Action speaks louder than words.

When we are tempted to say something negative about someone we know or even someone we don't know, we need to be guided by this one simple rule: do no harm. This rule reminds us that we need to be aware of how our attitude, words and actions affect others. We need to stop every now and then and ask ourselves, did any of my words or actions today cause anyone harm? In addition to our words, think about the many other ways we can hurt somebody. Have you ever been rude to somebody? Not spoken to someone because of something they said to you or how they hurt you in the past? Stared at someone who was different from you; poor, homeless or dressed differently? Stubbornly demanded your rights over others? Are you

always pointing out the mistakes of others? Do you criticize others? Do we judge the way others look, act and live? Do we look down on others?

Listen again to these words from Romans: "Bless and don't curse those who harass you; get along with everybody; don't be stuck-up; make friends with the no-bodies; don't think too highly of yourself." Sometimes in our pride and ego, we can mistreat others, especially when we think we are better than they are. We tend to forget that every person is a child of God who is loved by God just as we are. Jesus set the example for us; He respected all people no matter who they were or where they came from; He reached out to all - the poor, the sick, the outcasts – with love. We are called to do the same; to look for the good and Jesus in each person we meet. In Matthew 7:12, Jesus gave us the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Think what would happen if we took this first simple rule seriously, to do no harm? First of all, it would require an examination of the way we live and practice our faith. And if this is truly an honest examination, it would surely lead to a change in the way we practice our faith. To do no harm means that we would be on guard so that all our words and actions will not add injury to another one of God's children. It would mean that we would take time to think about the consequences before a word is spoken or an action is taken. It would mean walking in faith and trusting in God.

Starting this morning, let's us make it our goal to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and love instead of hatred. Let's look at each person as a child of God – a recipient of the unearned, unlimited and undeserved love of God, just as we are loved. Also take time to ask God for forgiveness for anyone you may have hurt and to make a commitment to practice doing no harm. Think of the difference that this will make in your life and the lives of those around you. It doesn't matter what you say you believe; it only matters what you do! Therefore, let us "Do no Harm!" Amen