

“A Rule of Life”

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Micah 6:8

God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Luke 10:25-28

... a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

John Wesley was born in a village in northern England in 1703, the son of Samuel and Susanna (who you'll hear more about in two weeks). He attended Christ Church College at Oxford and was ordained an Anglican priest like his father before him. While at Oxford, John joined the “holy club,” founded by his brother Charles (the hymn writer) whose members spent three hours every afternoon studying the Bible and other devotional materials. They also took vows to take Communion weekly, pray daily, and visit the prisons regularly. The club's methods became infamous and other Oxford students mockingly called them “Methodists.” The club embraced the name and it stuck.

After his time in Oxford, JW sailed to Georgia to serve as a pastor, his time there was a failure. The woman he courted married someone else. His congregation rebelled when he tried to instill holy club disciplines. He returned to England discouraged and questioning his faith. Encouraged by a friend, he attended a prayer meeting one evening. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today we begin a sermon series called, “Wesley-isms” – so called because two of the three quotes I'll be speaking, while accredited to John Wesley, are not actually his words. Today's adage sounds like something he might have said, but it was only linked to him in 1904!

John Wesley was an intelligent man. Well-educated. Meticulous. And an organizational genius. Observe: Days before his death at the age of 88, we know that there were 71,668 British Methodists with 294 pastors and 19 missionaries, and 43,265 U.S. ones with 198 preachers.

Wesley never intended to start a new church. In fact, he remained an Anglican priest his entire life. Methodism was a movement. Followers met in private homes as societies, and later classes, each with 11 members and a leader. Each week, they gathered to give accounts of their discipleship, give money for charity, pray and read the Bible. They also went to their home churches each week. Expectations were high. And the movement grew rapidly. Methodism continued to grow exponentially until 1844 – which is the year that the *Book of Discipline* no longer required all members to meet in classes weekly in addition to attending worship. Growth continued after that, for a number of years, but *much* slower. Some food for thought.

As classes first began to meet, they needed direction. To this end, JW wrote Three General Rules. First, do no harm. Do good. Attend to the practices the draw you closer to God.

Notice which part of the rule is first. Do no harm. Now, the Bible has rules: The Ten Commandments have plenty of “Thou shalt nots” as does Leviticus. You might think that Jesus' directive to “Love God” and “Love your neighbor” would be enough. Maybe it is for some people. But I've met plenty of folks – maybe you have, too – who interpret that love commandment either strictly as a feeling statement or with a very narrow definition of neighbor. This was not Jesus' intention.

Wesley knew that people needed something both simple and broad. Something they could remember, but which would also take them outside their comfort zones and their own circles of influence.

Think of the ease with which people can now travel all over the world. How easily we can reach out on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. Any person can have a global influence, for good or ill. We need a guideline to help us navigate our world – something simple we can remember, yet will demand that we practice with our lives.

First, do no harm. Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman church, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all” (12:17). This is a lot harder to live than we think it ought to be.

Besides avoiding harm, we need to consciously and actively do good. This is where the unsubstantiated quote on your bulletin cover comes in. Let’s read it together, shall we?

*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 ever we can.*

We do this, first and foremost, by caring for people’s physical needs. It’s in our Methodist DNA. At First Church, we do it through things you do on your own as well as through our apportionment and local agency support, Mission Guatemala, the PNC. If you’ve never seen the PNC, there’s an Open House coming up next Sunday

We also care for people’s mental/emotions and spiritual well-being, through particular ministries but perhaps especially through being present and listening.

I can’t speak for you, but I know I can get caught up in tasks to the point that if I’m not careful I can miss the chance to talk with someone. Most of us meet people each day who can really use more than a “Hi! How are you?” “Fine. How are you?” We need to be attentive or we might unthinkingly brush someone off.

In Bishop Job’s book *Three Simple Rules*, he names the third part, “Stay in love with God.” But again, that can be read as a feeling statement when in truth, Wesley was writing about practices those things that help us to grow in faith. Practices like worship, reading the Bible, praying, working for justice, comforting the afflicted, visiting the prisoner and the sick, fasting.

These things require time, which is the biggest excuse people give for not doing them. Yet, the biggest way we can show children that they matter to us is by devoting time to them – not simply quality time, but quantities of time. Nothing can substitute for spending time with friends, loved ones, or God. Time studying with others, time serving meals to people caught in poverty, prayer time, fellowship time – will you join us for the potluck later? – and worship time. Nothing can substitute for the time God expects us to devote to our discipleship.

We practice this Rule of Life not for anyone else, though others will benefit as we resist doing harm with our words and action and work to do good, every day and in every way. We don’t even practice for ourselves, though we benefit as we grow closer to God. No, we avoid doing harm, practice doing good, and work at growing closer to God because that’s what it means to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. That’s what it means to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. We do these things because God loves us, and we’re just so thankful for God’s presence and guidance in our lives.

Tony Campolo tells a story about a deacon at his church who wasn’t sure how God was leading him. So he prayed, a lot. Eventually, God led him to take the youth group each month to a local nursing home. One month, as he stood at the back of the room while the young people led a service, a man wheeled over next to him, took his hand and held it through the entire service.

Each month, he did this same thing until, one Sunday afternoon, he wasn’t there. A nurse told the deacon the man was near death. He could visit him, if he wanted, but he was unconscious.

The deacon walked to the man’s room and entered quietly. He took the dying man’s hand and, instinctively, he prayed. As he finished, the man squeezed his hand.

The deacon started to cry. He turned to leave and bumped into a woman who was entering. “He’s been waiting for you. He said he didn’t want to die until Jesus came and held his hand. I tried to tell him that after death he’d have a chance to meet Jesus. But he said, ‘No. Once a month, Jesus comes and holds my hand and I don’t want to leave until I have a chance to hold that hand one more time.’”

During our Wednesday study this week, we reminded ourselves that we don’t have to be perfect. As we live in love, God as Spirit works within our efforts, that they may perfectly reach out and reflect God’s love. When we live as we are led, without skimping, God’s action through us has a multiplying effect. The good we do, the harm we avoid are our response to the grace and love God showers on us.

Trusting in that love, we live out our best lives, sharing the best we have so that others may join us in joyful celebration. May it be so.

Amen.