**Series: John Wesley’s Three Simple Rules - #2: Do Good**

**Ephesians 2:4-10 (used as Call to Worship) and Matthew 7:12; 22:37-40 (NRSV)**

**By John Gill ~ February 4, 2024**

*(This sermon series is based on the book by Ruben Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living.1)*

This morning, we are continuing our look at the three simple rules that our founder, John Wesley, laid out for us, as followers of Jesus in the Methodist tradition. Also called, The General Rules, these three points summarize for us in plain uncomplicated language the basics of being a disciple of Jesus.

Last week we asked ourselves, “What could we do to make a better world?” “How can we be part of the solution instead of part of the problem?” “How could we live lives that bear witness to the love and unity of Christ in a deeply divided world?” We concluded that one tool that has been helpful for many can be found in Wesley’s three simple rules: 1. Do no harm, 2. Do good, 3. Stay in love with God.

Last Sunday we focused on the first rule “do no harm” – three words that seem so obvious and so simple, yet in practice, they are anything but easy to live out. In Wesley’s own words, “It is expected... that (believers) should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, First: by doing no harm… by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced...”

Last Sunday, we considered the consequences to our relationships, as well as to our witness for God, when we are careless in our words or actions, causing others pain. We hurt others when we draw battle lines in the sand - when we love winning an argument and being “right” more than we love people.

Wesley challenges us to vow that we would stop before we act or speak long enough to consider our actions, and deliberately decide that we will do no harm to others. Jesus asks us to trust God to win the battles, which allows us to focus on being present for, and loving, those whom God has put in our path. Indeed, Jesus points out that when we love others, when we live in loving unity, there is no more powerful witness to a deeply divided and conflicted world.

Today, we are moving on to the second rule, “do good.”

You know, many people think they are Christians because “they are good people” who avoid harming others. They do pretty well with doing no harm. They seem to believe that the Christian faith is a private religion. It's all about our own personal relationship with Jesus... that, as long as our own heart is right with God and we avoid doing harm to others, then we are doing everything that is required of our faith.

In other words, they believe their faith is just” me and Jesus,” and of course to an extent they are correct. But over and over again in the Gospels, we see that Jesus expects more of us.

Jesus had a heart for blessing those who were excluded from the religious community of his day: those who were considered “unclean” due to illness, injury, or disease; those who were considered “other” because of their gender or ethnicity; those who were considered “less than” because of economic or social status. Jesus demonstrated that being his disciple included acts of mercy- doing good deeds- such as feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the poor, and visiting the sick and those in prison. (Matthew 25: 35-36)

Yes, Wesley said that we are to do no harm-by avoiding evil. But he went on. Again, in Wesley's own words: “(Believers) should continue to evidence their desire of salvation... by doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as feasible, to all people...” Or, as Paul wrote in our Call to Worship this morning, “for we are what (God) has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

“Do good.” This second rule is even shorter and simpler than “do no harm.” Moreover, who doesn't want to do good? However, in practice, doing good can be even harder than doing no harm.

There's another famous quote attributed to Wesley [or at least is a summary of Wesley’s teaching on the subject] that goes like this: “Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as ever you can.”

I don't know about you, but I had mixed feelings when I first heard this quote from John Wesley. While I love the sentiment and certainly agree with the point he is making, at the same time, I find the repeated words all- all- all to be overwhelming... Like, maybe it's a bit too much to ask. Anyone else feel that way?

Almost 300 years ago, John Wesley pointed-out how overwhelming the opportunity to “do good” can feel. He wrote this: “There is scarce any possible way of doing good for which there is not daily occasion. Here are poor families to be relieved: here are children to be educated: here are workhouses, wherein both young and old gladly received the word of exhortation: here are the prisons, and therein a complication of all human wants."2

As Wesley noted, there is so much need that, at times it can feel overwhelming. That was true in Wesley’s day - and it is true today. When we consider our world… the countless challenges we face as a nation, and the multiple needs of the people all around us, we can feel exhausted- even hopeless. And, instead of doing what we can, doing something, we throw up our hands and do nothing. We just give up!

But, as we read in Ephesians, God has “created (us) in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Therefore, if we claim to be Christians, that means we really have no choice. Doing good is what God expects of us. That scripture from Ephesians says clearly that “doing good” is “to be our way of life” as Christians.

So, we are created by God to be “do-gooders,” to “do unto others as (we) would have them do unto (us)”. But that raises a whole host of issues for us to work out: if I'm really doing “all the good, at all times, in all ways, to all people” - then at some point my cup is going to be empty. Eventually, I’m going to run dry of resources (financial or emotional), and then crumble in on myself. How are we to understand and live-out this essential teaching of the faith?

When I was in school taking English, we sometimes had to analyze stories and poems, or to compose essays. We were taught a pneumonic device to help us in our task – “the five Ws”: who, what, when, where, and why. To help us think about this second general rule, let us consider these five questions: To whom should we do good? What good are we to do? When shall we do good? Where shall we do good? And most importantly, Why should we do good?

So first, to whom are we to do good? The obvious answer is, “to all.” That's pretty broad!

One time, Jesus was asked by a man how he could enter the Kingdom of God and the answer was that he should first love God and then love his neighbor as himself. The man then asked the question we are asking: “But who is my neighbor?” And you'll recall that Jesus then told the parable about the Good Samaritan.

Who is it that we are to do good for? Our neighbors! If we take seriously what Jesus and Wesley said, this “doing good” thing is not limited to those like us, or to those who like us. Jesus seems to be saying that we are supposed to do good for everyone, even those who don't fit our categories of persons worthy to receive good; those who don't share our values; those who may be working against us. Jesus says that we even are to do good to our enemies!

Now, that is a tough one! This second rule is no small task. This is even harder and more radical than doing no harm. It is one thing to make the choice to do no harm to those who may disagree with us, or even seek to harm us, or when attacked, to turn our other cheek and refuse to harm our enemies. But to actually do good to those who are against us- to those who want to harm us? It makes no sense- at least not in worldly terms. And of course, that is precisely what makes it such a tremendous witness to the world when we are able to do it!

John Wesley also calls us to do good to those who probably don't deserve it. Wesley had a heart for the poor, the sick, the sinners, and those in prison. And he encouraged those in the Methodist societies to live out their faith by doing good to the least, the lonely, and the lost.

Today we see that, in addition to those living in poverty there are others who are living on the margins of society who long for expressions of God's love in their lives... Those who are caught in addiction, those who are unwelcome and unaccepted because of their race, religion, ethnic background or sexual orientation, and those were are fleeing violence and abuse.

Our proper response to God's grace shown to us is to do good to others- what Wesley called “acts of mercy”-unselfish acts of love that bless others without seeking recognition or anything in return; giving grace upon grace- to others.

We are expected to do good even to those who, in our minds, haven't earned “good”- even to those who don't deserve “good.”

I am reminded of the old story of the four-year-old who prayed, “and forgive us our trash baskets, as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets.” That four-year-old had it right. Jesus is saying that we are to forgive and do good, even to those who “put trash in our baskets.”

It's easy for us to decide to do good to those like us, and to those who like us: our family and friends, folks in the church, people of our own ethnic or racial group, people who are culturally similar to us. In other words, people we believe are ‘worthy’ of our concern and compassion.

But Jesus calls us to do good to all people- even those we may think are not deserving. Which brings us to the second question: What good are we to do?

Just like the question of “who,” the question of “what” is so broad that it doesn't have much meaning. There are unlimited needs all around us, but we are limited in what we can do. So how do we decide?

Christians are, by nature, people with hearts filled with compassion. When we see a need, our first impulse is to try to fill that need- to help in any way we can. But with so much need out there, we can quickly experience “compassion fatigue.” The needs are so great! We want to help… to fix people's problems... But we can't! We don't have the resources to meet the never-ending needs. “Doing good” can be hard, because once you start, where do you stop? The needs seem infinite! Because we can't solve everyone's problem, we can become cynical, and hold back on doing what we could do to help. Sometimes we feel that the problems of our world are so enormous and daunting that we have no power to do good that would make any real difference. But that is not true. Only a few people in positions of great authority can impact the biggest problems many people face, but each of us can do our part in offering love, encouragement, and hope to the people we come in contact with. We can't save the world - but we can save our neighbor.

There's another thing we struggle with in determining what good we should do: “Is what we want to do for others helping them, or hurting them?” Our good works, well-intentioned as they may be, can only make the situation worse. There's a term for this: “toxic charity.”

For instance: We see a homeless person on the street begging for a handout. How are we supposed to know what it means to” do good” for her or him? Should we hand him cash? Give food? Give her the phone number for Salvation Army or a homeless shelter?

When someone comes to the church for help paying an overdue utility bill and we have the funds to cover it, even though we suspect he won't be able to pay it again next month, are we showing compassion by paying it, or should we decline to pay and encourage him to seek an alternative living arrangement?

Yes, knowing what “good" to do is often complicated. We must pray about it, seek God's wisdom, and use our best judgment when helping people. But, even though oftentimes it's hard to know what is best, we can't use that as an excuse for doing nothing!

That impossible quote from John Wesley I shared earlier is made possible when you go back and reread the first line: “Do all the good YOU CAN.” We all have limits to what we can do. But we must do whatever we can!

Our third question to consider is: “When shall we do good?” Of course, the answer is, “always - whenever the opportunity presents itself!”

Lots of people compartmentalize their lives. They place different aspects of their lives in different silos: marriage, family, friends, career, community, and so forth. They have a “religion silo” as well - often limited to Sunday mornings - but they don't let their faith spill-over into the other areas of their lives. But, being a disciple of Jesus is not a part time gig, it is 24/7. We can't put God on the shelf at noon on Sundays and ignore him the rest of the week.

Yes, sometimes we limit our doing good to Sunday mornings, or doing good only as part of what our congregation does - and that is certainly important to do! Tomoka UMC is busy doing good all throughout the week and we couldn't do these good things without all of you who volunteer and contribute! So thank you!

But, do we do good when we aren't at church? Are we constantly aware of the needs of those around us every day, looking for ways we can do good for them? When we end each day, can we look back on that day and count the kindnesses we have shown to others?

Have you ever seen the movie, “Pay It Forward”? It is a great film based on a true story about a boy named Trevor and his classmates. The children in that elementary classroom are asked to create projects that will change the world, something that will make the world a better place. Most of the students get busy trying to think of some new invention that will revolutionize the way we do X, Y, or Z, But not Trevor! He comes up with an idea that, if we could do an act of kindness for others that is so life changing that it rearranges a person's life making their life better, then they will, in turn, pay forward the good deed to others, causing a ripple effect of doing good. And, spoiler alert! Trevor’s “pay it forward” scheme worked!

These are the kinds of proactive, bold and radical “acts of good” that we are called to do daily. Maybe it's a new commitment to volunteer somewhere, like preparing meals for the homeless at Bridge of Hope or Palmetto House. Maybe it's getting to know your neighbors and doing good right in your corner of the city . Maybe there's someone at work that God is calling you to love and help. Maybe it’s getting involved with the justice ministry, Fighting Against Injustice Towards Harmony, and working together with other people of faith to encourage our elected officials to use their power and influence to improve the lives of all those living in our County. Whatever it is, we are all called to “do good” as often as possible. And, whether you see it or realize it, through these good works, we are “paying it forward” - changing the world, one heart and life at a time.

So, When shall we do good? Whenever the opportunity presents itself. Now, Where shall we do good?

John Wesley always thought big... He was famously quoted as saying “The world is my parish.” And, in a real sense, this is true for all of us. The mission statement of our United Methodist denomination is this: “Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” It is important that we have big goals!

What is your personal mission statement as a follower of Jesus? Have you ever thought about that? Why has God placed you on this planet? For what purpose has Jesus saved you? When you go to heaven and stand before God, what will God have expected you to have accomplished in this life? Only a few will have been able to change the world by the good they have done. But, what about right here at home - did our good deeds make a difference in the lives of others, those in our sphere of influence?

While we may all want to change the world, I believe God expects you and me to have at least changed our little corner of the world. As Mother Teresa once said, “We can do no great things; Only small things with great love.”

So, we have considered the Who, What, When, and Where of doing good. And everything we have said is essential. But, the most important question of them all is – WHY? What is our motivation to do good? Why even bother?

When we think about it, we will realize that we are not doing good in order to please the person receiving our kindness, nor to impress our neighbors, our family, or others in the church - not even the preacher. No - our desire to do good should be a direct response to the grace extended to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. And, out of our love for Jesus, and in obedience to his command, we joyfully fulfill his desire that we extend that grace to others. We do good to all - for CHRIST’s sake!

Because we do good for Christ’s sake, that means we are freed to do good, even to those who may seek to do harm to us. If we do good for Christ’s sake, we can do good to those we fear may scam us or misuse our gifts. If we're doing good for Christ’s sake, we can even do good to those who would never do good to us. Why? Because we are not doing good for THEM! We are doing good for GOD!

Don't get me wrong. Even doing good for God is far from easy. It is a challenging way to live! To love God with our whole being, and to love our neighbors - ALL our neighbors- as ourselves, is really hard. But then, God never said it would be easy.

Some years ago, the Nike athletic-wear company came out with a very effective ad campaign that, in three little words, called us all to exercise so we can be our best self physically. Remember? Just do it.

If we want to succeed in this second general rule of the Christian life, to do good so that we can be our best self spiritually, the message is the same: “Just Do It.”

“For we are what God has made us - created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand- to be our way of life.”

So, this week I invite us all to look for ways to “do good” at all times and to all people.

Just do it - for Christ’s sake!

1 Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living, by Rueben Job. Abingdon Press. 2007

2 John Wesley’s Journal from August 12, 1738 – November 1, 1739

*Other sources extensively used and quoted (each of whom also cited the Rueben Job book):*

Do Good, by the pastor of Maple Grove UMC, West Des Moines, IA

Do Good, by Leah Russo, First United Methodist Church of the St. Cloud Region, Sartell, MN

Do Good, by Kim Fields, Central Church, Richland, WA