

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

“Three Simple Rules”

Galatians 5:13-23
May 3, 2009

People seem to be attracted to lists and so we have Twenty One Irrefutable Laws, Top Ten Lists, Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Five Things We Cannot Change, Four Practices of Spiritual Growth, and now in our Wesleyan tradition we have Three Simple Rules. These three rules were inspired by John Wesley’s conviction that everyone needs help in living a holy life.

These rules are summarized by Bishop Rueben Job as:

Do No Harm. Do Good. Stay in love with God.

Our Minister of Congregational Care Julie Cicak begins a class in the Parlor this morning and continuing through May 24th on these rules, so please join her.

Wesley outlines these practices in the “General Rules” and offered them as his way of helping Christians live disciplined, grace filled lives.

Now I realize that rules do not evoke positive responses in most people. The word rule means to regulate, control, dominate or issue a formal order, as in “The Pastor ruled that from now on, everyone would obey her.”

Rules are not always perceived as a welcome thing.

Yet in this case rules are designed to liberate us, to bless us and fulfil us. They are ancient wisdom, but amazingly well suited to our time and culture.

Today I want to examine them as a means of guiding our daily lives.

Do No Harm

This rule reminds me of those lessons you learn in Kindergarten such as “keep your hands to yourself.” It does seem so obvious as to be self-explanatory, and we would all assume that we live this way every day. We try not to deliberately harm anybody. But there is actually more to avoiding harm than you might think.

Permanent harm can come from words and silence, actions and attitudes that disrespect or damage another person’s spirit. Harm can be done by commission and omission, and often we are completely unaware of the harm we are causing.

So, practicing this first rule involves great self-awareness.

“Do No Harm” is actually the foundation of modern medicine.

Hippocrates, who lived in the 4th century BC, was considered the father of medicine, and he developed the Hippocratic oath which requires physicians to “Do no harm to anyone.”

John Wesley saw this as essential for a follower of Christ.

To do no harm means that we are careful and thoughtful, we think before we speak and act, we make sure our behavior and even our silence does not injure any of God's children or harm any part of God's creation.

This includes those whom we dislike and those with whom we disagree.

We are to live our lives in such a way that we heal instead of hurt, create wholeness instead of division, act in harmony with the ways of Jesus and not the ways of the world. (Job, 31)

Yet doing no harm to others or God's creation does not go far enough.

This rule also needs to apply to ourselves.

Most of us are unaware of how we harm ourselves with our thoughts, actions, habits and lifestyle choices.

We put things into our minds and bodies every single day that are not good for us, we get locked into patterns of thought and action that diminish ourselves.

I have learned that the more harm I inflict upon myself, the easier it is to harm others with judgmental thoughts and careless actions.

On any given day I will tell myself things like:

"That was stupid." "How could you forget her name?" "Why did you say that?"

"Why aren't you doing more for the church, your family, people who suffer?"

Now it's true, we all need to do better and improve ourselves, but continually beating up on ourselves only makes it easier to beat up on others.

Now living this way might be seen as weakness or naivete.

Bishop Job asks: "Is it possible to live in this complex and violent world without doing harm?...Is it really wise to do **no** harm to those who seek to harm us, our future, or reputation?" (Job, 27)

Clearly Jesus practiced a way of living that did no harm.

He was sensitive, thoughtful, intentional in the way he related to others.

Our Scripture lesson from Galatians talks about the benefits of such a life.

First, there is great freedom characterized by obedience, service, and love.

Not the freedom to indulge ourselves, but freedom to live by God's Spirit.

When we seek only our own way, we do harm to ourselves and others.

But when we seek God's way we bear the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, peace, joy, serenity, self control.

Doing no harm means that you decide every single day that your life will bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; harmony with the ways of Jesus instead of the ways of the world.

Do Good

In a Journal entry from 1738 John Wesley wrote:

“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 receive the word of God, here are prisons, and therein a complication of all human wants.” (Job, 35)

And of course we have the command of Jesus from Luke: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

Based upon this command of Jesus which is a universal principle of all spiritual paths, United Methodists are shameless and tireless do-gooders.

This church exists to help you become a shameless and tireless do-gooder too. We want to help you do all the good you can for all the people you can as long as ever you can.

We offer numerous opportunities for you to do good, right here in our church, in our neighborhood, and around the world.

This month when we honor mothers, we are collecting specific baby items for Bridgeway home for pregnant teenagers and their babies.

Please bring items to leave in the playpen at the back of the sanctuary.

One ministry we have not done yet is prison ministry, and so our Christmas in July this year will be for a detention facility for youth, and we will have an opportunity to visit them at the detention facility when their gifts are delivered and we will host a cookout there.

We are not only interested in doing good for those who deserve it or appreciate it. We want to do good for those who really are not so deserving, people who are very different and can never do anything for us in return.

Our desire to do good stems from a love for God and gratitude for all God has given us. It is not motivated by results or getting something in return.

This doing good is a very simple rule, but it can be challenging.

It involves forgetting ourselves, inconveniencing ourselves, pushing ourselves.

Thinking of others and the common good before our own wants and needs.

This is so contrary to the messages we get every day that tell us to put ourselves first and indulge in our every desire.

Thus, our culture has created an environment where greedy executives plunge faithful employees into poverty. A culture where the majority of the world's resources are used by a fraction of the world's population.

A culture in which anything goes, as long as you do not get caught.

In such an environment, doing good can be a counter cultural activity—an act of

risk taking courage and faith.

Yet doing good is really what we are all about as the people of God.

And in reaching out to others we bless ourselves.

We find a satisfaction that nothing else can give.

How different would our lives be if we deliberately tried to do all the good we can, for all the people we can, in all the places we can, as long as ever we can.

Just by following that simple rule, we could change the world.

Stay in love with God

This is the most important of all.

Bishop Job believes that without this third rule, the other two are impossible.

Doing no harm and doing good require more than human efforts alone.

On our own, most of us would be pretty self-centered and selfish.

But the guiding and loving presence of God can bring the transformation we so desperately need.

Thus we need to remember to stay in love with God. To regularly nurture our relationship with God through worship, Holy communion, prayer, devotional reading, acts of mercy, and time spent in nature and silence.

All relationships require attention and work, including this most primary and essential one.

In the musical "Fiddler on the Roof," Tevye asks his wife, Golde:

"Do you love me?" "Do I what?" she replies.

"Do you love me?" he asks. In exasperation she says: "For 25 years I have washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned the house, given you children, milked your cow. And now you asking if I love you?"

In the end they affirm their love for each other, as Tevye says,

"Even after 25 years, it is nice to know."

It is nice for God to know that we love God, that we have not forgotten the one who created us, the one who loves us and never lets us go.

Jesus modeled this throughout his ministry, knowing that he could only fulfill his mission in life by staying close to God.

He knew there was a supernatural power available to him, if he regularly sought it.

He stayed connected to God, and that gave him strength, courage and peace.

A living relationship with God will do the same for us.

These three simple rules are the heart of what it means to be a Christian and to be infused with the Holy Spirit.

As Paul wrote in the letter to the Galatians:

“What happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives...things like affection for others, exuberance for life, serenity. We develop a sense of compassion, we see a holiness in all things and all people.”

May it be so for us as we seek to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God.

Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living by Ruben P. Job (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007.)