

When I think of the characteristics that mark a Methodist as described by John Wesley, the first thing that comes to my mind are, what has been dubbed in recent years, the three simple rules: Do no harm. Do good always. Stay in love with God. They seem so simple, yet they can be so difficult to live into at times. They are difficult because they require us to live as faithful disciples, in partnership with God, who will not let us simply stay as we are. God is constantly re-creating us, moving us towards being the person God can see us being. We are not called to simply be content with the person we are today, we are seeking to be transformed by God, and in our own transformation we find hope that God will transform the world.

For the next three weeks we will be looking at these three simple rules, also known as the general rules. When John Wesley penned the three-fold task of being Methodist, the first was do no harm, and avoid evil of every kind. The list of what this included seem to go on and on - do not take the name of the Lord in vain, honor the Sabbath, avoid drunkenness, salve-holding, quarreling in all forms, and speaking evil. Do unto other as you would want them to do unto you. We are to seek to do no harm and avoid all evil in order to bring God the glory.

The epistle, or letter, of 1 John speaks about doing no harm as an act of love - reminding us that we only know love at all because of the love that Christ showed us on the cross - thus reminding us that all love come from God. As an act of love towards God, we love others - not because they are deserving, but because they are the beloved of God.

Yet, we are slow to show this type of love - and in doing so we cause harm. We cause harm when we focus on having people prove their love to us before we love them in return - as if are the barrier of love between them and God. Perhaps this is why John admonishes us to love in deed and truth. The truth is that we cannot earn God's love, yet God loves us anyway - and in return we love others about of this abundance that we have received. When we seek to do no harm we can no longer gossip, speak disparagingly, manipulate the facts, or diminish others. It means we intentionally put other people first and live into the commandment to love others as we love ourselves.

But doing no harm is not the same thing as being nice. When we are simply nice to one another, we are not pushing each other to go beyond our comfort zones in order to grow in faith or holding our tongues from speaking the difficult words of truth. If we substitute niceness for “do no harm”, we are not following the narrow road that the gospel has laid out for us by the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We could actually be bringing harm upon each other by not saying the messages that need to be heard. Those tough things that need to be said in love. What do we do and say that brings life to others? In what ways do we prohibit others from being the person God has called them to be? When our incites become trite, and seek to appease instead of lead, we are not being bearers of light and life.

Another way we do harm is by ignoring the needs of others - not looking after those who are the most distressed. John reminds us that God's love abides in us and is made known when we care for those in need. How do you intentionally look after those who are in need? When you look into their eyes do you realize that it could be you in need some day? John Wesley talked about two types of sin in his preaching - sins of commission - those things that we do that harm others and God, and sins of omission - those things that harm people by our lack of action or speaking up. I don't think anyone seeks to purposely harm another human being, but often our silence does just that.

When we don't speak up on behalf of the distressed or don't do as much as we could or treat people as if they are less than - we are causing them harm. Making sure our actions, and even our silences, do not harm another person. When we seek to do no harm, we have to ask God to show others love through us, each moment of every day. It is impossible for us to do no harm on our own, because it's counter-cultural to the world we live in. It requires us to see people through the eyes of Christ and act accordingly.

Perhaps some of the times we do the most harm to another person is when we disagree with them, something we are ever aware of in the current political climate. We feel as if we are being attacked because someone doesn't think the same way we do. But author Ruben Job reminds us, "When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation, dialogue, and discovery of new insight become possible." Seeking to do no harm opens up a world of possibilities where we can see people in new ways, interact with them in beautiful ways that find common ground instead of focusing on those things that set us apart from one another.

Doing no harm, also means that we need not harm ourselves. This is possibly the hardest one for Christians to grasp because we are used to people telling us to put others first, which is true. But God does not require us to harm ourselves. To belittle ourselves. To let others physically, emotionally, or spiritually hurt us. For whenever we harm others or ourselves, we bring harm to the God who loves us so deeply.

And perhaps that is the entire point behind these general rules. They exist to remind us that God passionately loves us and everyone else. They invite us into deeper relationship with our brothers and sisters and God. They weren't crafted in order for us to look at the world and see how bad things are, rather they exist to show us what the world was created to be and what it can become, through faithfulness and by the grace of God. These rules require us to be bound to Jesus Christ, above all else. That we examine the way we live and practice our faith. And make sure that we shine the image of God that was created in our spirits, so that others may be drawn to Christ by the way we treat them. Amen.