

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open your eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hurting, hungry, and dying without the knowledge of your love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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

Three simple rules for a Wesleyan way of living.

Last week we talked about doing no harm. How, at its essence, it is living the golden rule to treat people the same way that you would want them to treat you.

This week I will talk about the second of the general rules, the rule to do good.

These first two rules are alike in that they are referring to the manner in which we conduct our relationships with other people. When we do no harm and we treat folks the way that we want them to treat us, we are attempting to live as Christ taught us to live to see and respect the image of God in us and in others. When we do good, we take an active part in making the world around us a little better, even if for just a moment.

We know how to do good.

We know how to feed the hungry.

We know how to care for the sick and the prisoner, and for those who love them.

We know how to care for the widow and the orphan, for the homeless and the hopeless.

We know how to do these things because we know that the greatest commandment is this: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all of your mind, and with all your strength... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark12: 29-31, NRSV). It is a foundation of love, love of God and love of neighbor that undergirds everything that we do and say as followers of Christ.

Doing good calls us to live outside ourselves, to put our wants and our needs in the background in order to live in community with others in a way that lifts all of us up.

Doing good means being countercultural in a narcissistic culture that emphasizes “me first” in everything, that encourages self-satisfaction and self-gratification above all else.

Doing good means to put our ego aside to tend to the greater good.

It means that our first instinct is to help others who are hurting, grieving, and beaten down by life.

It means extending a helping hand to those in need before we are asked. It means allowing the Spirit to work through us in a way that makes the desire to do good a natural and automatic action on our part.

There is a statement that is attributed to John Wesley, that, more accurately should be attributed to an unknown follower of Wesley, but it sums up the very heart of what this second rule to do good is all about. The statement 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,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.

This statement sums up what Wesleyan theology is all about. It is about combining our faith (our relationship with God) and our works (our actions as a response to that relationship) as two sides of the same coin. We Wesleyan/Armenians are not people who believe in either faith or works. We are people who believe in both faith and works. We acknowledge the tension between both and the sacrifice that is embodied in the combination of the two.

This both/and idea is why some credit Wesley and the Methodists for preventing the tide of revolution that consumed Western Europe in the latter 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The essential combination of both piety and good works led the Methodists to advocate for better working conditions in the coal mines of Wales (and ending the child labor that was so prevalent in that age). It led to what we now know as Sunday School. Yet, the original purpose of the Sunday School movement was to give these same children a chance at an education. Yes, the original purpose of Sunday School was not necessarily to teach about the Bible and pass on the faith to the children. The original purpose of the Sunday School movement was to teach this children who were essentially slaves working in the coal mines and in the factories

and teach them how to read and write so that they might have a better chance at a life and to break the cycle of poverty that held them back.

It was the combination of the first rule to “do no harm” and the second rule to “do good” that led Wesley to be a staunch abolitionist. In fact, he and a converted slave trader named John Newton (who wrote the poem that became Amazing Grace) were primary influences upon William Wilberforce, the member of Parliament who made it his life’s work to end slave trade and the practice of keeping slaves in the British Empire. It was a conflict over these two rules that led to the schism of the Methodist Episcopal Church into separate northern and southern entities in 1844 – a division that was not repaired until 1939. It is a division that is still having repercussions today.

The rule to do good has led Methodists to advocate for better working conditions for the poor.

To found hospitals and orphanages to care for the sick and for children in need of stable homes.

To found schools and colleges to offer a way out of the cycle of poverty through education and opportunity. At Annual Conference this year, we mourned the closing of Hiwassee College in Madisonville, Tennessee, after 170 years of faithful service as a Methodist institution.

The rule to do good has led us to advocate for trade unions in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the wealth inequality gap was as great or greater as it is today, so that workers could be paid a living wage that compensated them for their contribution to the bottom line for their employers while working in safe conditions.

It has led us to advocate for fair treatment of the immigrant as called for in the biblical text. I have no doubt that Wesley would be outraged by the inhumane treatment of children at our borders today... children who are held in conditions that deny them even the basic necessities of sanitation (limited access to water, to soap, to toothpaste and toothbrushes). Our United Methodist Committee on Relief was denied access to the detention facilities to provide these basic necessities – this should outrage us all, regardless of our political loyalties... period.

Doing good. It's a lifestyle. A lifestyle that mimics Christ, that shares the love of Christ with everyone, that demands nothing in return yet returns blessings beyond measure.

It is a lifestyle that reminds us that it's not about us.

And I don't know about you, but I need that reminder each and every day.

Three Simple Rules of life.

Do no harm. Do Good. Stay in Love with God.

Let it be so.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen,