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August 4, 2019

Three Simple Rules: Stay in Love with God

This morning, we wrap up our three-week sermon series on John Wesley's Three Simple Rules, which if lived out in our lives, provide the basic framework for faithfulness in action. Two weeks ago, we looked at the first rule, "Do no harm," as essentially living at peace with others, not returning evil for evil, avoiding gossip and lies which cause harm. Last week, we explored how "doing good" simply means living mercifully in the world. Feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, serving those in need, and always being on the lookout for how God is calling you to serve others in love. We talked about how living like this, according to John Wesley's Rules for Christian Living... 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... could be incredibly exhausting and spiritually, emotionally, and financially draining, unless we have healthy boundaries, AND have some way to fill our cup, so we don't end up dried out, running on fumes. This week, we turn to our third and final of the three simple rules, the one that taps us into our power source and fuels us up for faithful living - "Stay in love with God."

[Show power strip] How many of you have one of these somewhere in your house? It's a power strip. You plug this into the wall, and then you plug a lot of things into it. We have one in our living room, and it's got a variety of things plugged into it: our TV, the DVD player, our Firestick, the Xbox (that we rarely, if ever, never use), the wireless router, charging cables, and I'm sure more! The power strip takes power from the source, and it gives power to all those devices. A lot of things depend on that power strip.

And like that power strip, a lot of things depend on me: my family and friends, this church, our staff, the committees I work with, the Bible study I lead, the people I counsel and minister to all through the week. They depend on me for love, leadership, guidance, companionship, pastoral care, and more.

Like this power strip, a lot of things depend on me– But UNLIKE the power strip, far too often, I do THIS: [*Plug the power strip into itself*] Instead of plugging into a source that gives me the power to help people, I just plug into myself. I try to do it all in my own power. I get up in the morning, and just jump right into the tasks I have lined up for the day... I rush from one commitment to the next thinking, “I need to do this, I need to prep that, I need to make X, Y, and Z happen.” I go through the day like this [*hold up power strip*] – depending upon my own power and strength to get me through. How many of you do the same... we run on our own power because we forget, or don't take the time, to connect ourselves into the source of all life and love?

This power strip is a tangible and contextual way for us to illustrate how we need to connect ourselves into a power beyond ourselves, but Jesus used a different image, one that was contextual where and when he lived. He chose the image of a grapevine... something his contemporaries would have been very familiar with. On a grapevine, the roots of the vine go down and draw in water and nutrients from the soil. The vine grows up and spreads along the trellis, branching sprout from the vine. As long as these branches remain connected to that main vine, the nutrients will flow through the system, up the vine through the branches to produce grapes.

Jesus uses this image, “I am the vine, you are the branches” to show how we are dependent on the strength and grace we receive from staying connected and tapped into God. We heard a similar metaphor used in our text from Jeremiah, about a tree that is planted by the water, how it will not fear, even when trouble comes because it will always continue to draw strength from the flowing water that it is rooted beside.

I wonder... are you tapped into the wellspring of love? Are you connected to the vine? Are you plugged into the source? If so, what does that look like in your life? How do you remain connected to God? What kinds of things do you do to maintain that connection in the midst of our turbulent world?

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement which birthed our denomination, worked on keeping his connection with God vital through spiritual disciplines and practices that he called the “ordinances” of God or the “means of grace”. Our tendency to “plug into our own power chord” and neglect our relationship with God is exactly why John Wesley said we need to make sure we always “stay in love with God,” regularly connecting with God to draw from God’s strength and love.

If we are not careful in our faith, we can find ourselves drifting away from God, blaming God for bad things that have happened in our lives, or even turning away from God completely, telling ourselves that we don’t need God... that we’ve got this on our own. Jesus saw it in the people he was trying to lead to faith, Wesley saw it, and I have seen it in each of the churches I have served. How do we keep from moving away from our faith in Christ and turning away from God when everything goes crazy in our life? Or even when everything is going well and we think we don’t need God.

In her book, *Illuminated Life*, Joan Chittister puts it this way, “All we have in life is life. Things—the cars, the houses, the educations, the jobs, the money—come and go, turn to dust between our fingers, change and disappear... . the secret of life ... is that it must be developed from the inside out.”

Spiritual disciplines teach us to live our lives in harmony with something larger than ourselves and larger than that which the world values as ultimate. Wesley says that some of these ways of growing in love, “means of grace” or “ordinances” are worship, hearing and studying Scripture, Holy Communion, prayer, and fasting.

We may name our spiritual disciplines differently – maybe ours include walks on the beach or anywhere in the great outdoors, journaling, doing a morning devotional, spending time with children, serving others, or joining in conversation around our faith. No matter what our means and methods of strengthening our relationship with God are, we must find our way of living and practicing those disciplines that will keep us in love with God—practices that will help keep us connected and open to experiencing God’s presence and power every day and in every situation.

And so, as our series draws to a close, I remind you that this last of the Three Simple Rules, "Staying in love with God" is important because we cannot do this... all of this... on our own. We, like the power strip, cannot pull power from ourselves... we must be tapped into the source! As much as we try to live faithfully, avoiding harm and doing good, by ourselves we will eventually fail... we'll be like an empty cup that has nothing left to pour out... We'll shift into resentment for being asked to serve, or lash out at others who cross us the wrong way. Our good intentions get twisted up in our emotional/spiritual exhaustion.

But the good news is that we are not alone, we don't have to do it on our own, nor should we try! Staying in love with God is about remembering and claiming the grace that God offers to each of us, the strength and love that fills us to overflowing so that all we do is fueled by God's love flowing through us. As we go into our week, may God's Spirit help us to make a different world, as we do no harm and do all the good we can. May we shine brightly as beacons of love and hope, as we stay in love with God, sharing God's light of love with all we meet. Amen!