

Going Negative

Last Sunday we started to explore John Wesley's Three Simple Rules: 1) Do no harm; 2) Do good; and 3) stay in love with God. Wesley came up with these rules to help Methodists live a faithful and fruitful Christian life. He based them on Jesus' Great Commandment: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

It seemed to Wesley that love summed up what the Christian life was all about and he offered his three simple rules as a practical way put that love into action. To "walk our talk," in other words.

Yet if it's all about love, why did Wesley start out by "going negative" – by making his first rule a negation: do no harm?

How do you do something you're not supposed to do?

Why couldn't Wesley have started in a different place, like with something positive, as in "do good," or at least, "be nice"?

Distorted Image

Well, Wesley started where he did because he believed he had to start with what he had: with human beings who, though created in the image of God, are deformed by sin. Made for good, but capable (and often inclined) to a lot do harm.

The Bible gave Wesley lots of ready examples of people doing harm: Cain killing Abel; David running off with Bathsheba, Judas betraying Jesus and Peter denying him.

The Bible also offered hope for transformation. Wesley believed and taught that by the grace of God, the God's image in us could be renewed. Which is wonderful news: no one is fated to be a nasty human being. Scrooge can be reformed. You and I can be reborn. God could make us capable of wanting and doing the right thing.

But this transformation would require more than wishful thinking. God in Christ would do the "heavy work of renewing our souls, but

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we'd have to begin living as new people. Wesley called this "Holy living," which meant acting on our beliefs.

Last week we talked about Wesley's image of "moving into a house." About how God opens the door for us, but we have to step across the threshold and move in.

Stop! Its Over!

Today, as we begin to get our minds around this first simple rule, let me draw on an image from my childhood. Kind of an embarrassing one, actually.

The summer between fourth and fifth grade, I hung out with a neighbor boy who was the classic example of "the bad influence." He taught me to swear, spit and pick fights.

One day, he sent me into the street to fight Nick, a boy who'd up until that moment been a friend. But under the influence of the neighbor bully, I went at Nick.

Why? For all the wrong reasons. It certainly wasn't about self-defense or to protect an innocent – about the only two legitimate reasons to harm someone.

Think about the last time you harmed someone. What were your reasons? Do they seem like much to you today? Its amazing how we rationalize and fantasize, isn't it?

Well, I smacked Nick in the eye, he bloodied my lip. We fell to the pavement and rolled around like dogs in the street. A crowd of cheering, jeering kids gathered to watch the spectacle.

A car stopped and a stranger got out. He came over to Nick and me and pulled us a part so our fists could no longer connect. But like machines, we just kept swinging at the air. Finally he said in a loud, authoritative voice, "It's over. You can stop swinging."

Startled, we looked at each other, and realized he was right. We put our fists down.

On the cross, Jesus said, “It is finished.” By what he did for us there, he broke the power which kept us bound to sin and death. He made us free to become new people. What remains is for us to “stop swinging:” to stop acting like prisoners of sin and death and start living like agents of God’s goodness and mercy.

Going Negative with God’s 10 Simple Rules

You certainly find this idea reflected in the 10 Commandments, what we might call God’s “10 Simple Rules.” When we study these closely, we find all but one of them are formulated in the negative:

- you shall not murder
- you shall not commit adultery
- you shall not steal
- and so on...

Paying attention to these “nots” is essential for living a healthy and holy life. They make it clear sometimes what we stop (or never start) to do contributes as much to the common good as what we do.

Five Practices

But then, we’re back to our original question: how do you do something you’re not supposed to do? What does “doing no harm” look like?

Wesley was big on specifics and he gave his 18 century English Methodists a detailed list of things not to do, including everything from slaveholding to drunkenness to “the putting on of gold and costly apparel.”

If you’re interested you can find Wesley’s original list in the back of your Three Simple Rules devotional. Reading it over I think you’ll be amazed at how contemporary this 250 year old document still is. Its not all that dated.

Dan Dick, a staff person with our General Board of Discipleship, recently took on the task of adapting Wesley’s teaching on “doing no

harm” and came up with five practical ways congregations in our time and place can practice this rule¹.

He said for you and me to “do no harm” today we must:

1. refuse to gossip
2. avoid unfair criticism
3. rely on fact rather than rumor
4. be respectful
5. and deal with disagreement openly and honestly

I was moved in particular by what Dan said regarding gossip and disrespect.

Regarding gossip, he said:

We all have opinions, and we all find fault with the behavior of others. Problems arise, however, when we talk about people rather than talking to people. Gossip is like a cancer: It takes hold, spreads, and offers nothing of value to the whole organism...

Because gossip is so prevalent in our culture, it is... deeply humbling to be in the presence of someone who will not speak ill of someone else. We should never underestimate the power of this simple witness. There is only one way to eliminate gossip — and the toxic influence of gossip — and that is simply not to do it.

What he says about disrespect is similar:

The Golden Rule is not just a happy little saying; it is a fundamental value of the Christian life. Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you requires a fundamental respect of every person you meet... We have no right to treat anyone unkindly, even though he or she might treat us poorly... When we treat other people with respect, we model civility, decency, and acceptance; and we make it nearly impossible to do harm.

¹ http://www.gbod.org/equipped/articles.asp?item_id=8218

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You see, in the end, “doing no harm” isn’t “going negative” at all, if by that we mean failing to do anything positive. Doing no harm is actually one of the boldest and most powerful ways of bringing positive change to a situation.

Bishop Job, in his little brown book, taking this “simple step will change your life in good and wonderful ways,” “bring[ing] healing and goodness to all...”