

“STEPS TO THE GREAT LIFE (#1): DO NO HARM”

(Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9-10)

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**[ORDER BEFORE SERMON: “Three Simple Rules” Bookmarks;  
and Three Simple Rules Rueben Job book, available for purchase]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 9-13-09]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Texts: Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9-10 and Pray.

2. Everyone wants a great life – it’s an obsession for today’s culture (really for all cultures!).

A–We want to be successful, have good marriages, friendships, and family relationships, own nice homes and cars, and be healthy, wealthy and wise.

B–So, to have a “great life,” many of us turn on Dr. Phil or Opra, we read self-help books, workout at the gym, & seek advice from our Friends & Followers on Facebook & Twitter.

C–And yet, if you’re a person of faith at all you know that having just *any* great life is not the same as having THE great life –...

...A life which consists of a passionate, growing relationship with God;

...A life marked *not* by the accumulation of material *things*, but by the presence of spiritual intangibles like love, hope, joy, peace, fulfillment, forgiveness, and grace.

D–So what does it take to have this kind of great life with God? What are the steps to it? And what does it actually look like in daily practice?

3. Well, in today’s first scripture (Matthew 22), Jesus is actually questioned about the character and nature of this kind of life with God – [*Contemp. ONLY...* Listen to what he says: (*Read Matthew 22:34-40 from THE MESSAGE...*)]

A–And notice that though the Pharisees here were trying to trap Jesus, hoping he’d give some clever speech about what we need to *believe*, or recite some creed for us to *adopt*,...

B–...Instead, to have this “great life” with God he gives two simple principles for his followers to *ACT* upon. We know them collectively today as “The Great Commandment” (Love God; Love your neighbor).

4. And 1700 years later, the founder of Methodism John Wesley took these principles and fleshed them out into three “General Rules” for his Methodists to follow.

(I know what you’re thinking... leave it to a Methodist preacher to take *two* of Jesus’ principles and make them into *three*!)

A–But we can’t argue with the results, because the early Methodists’ *practice* of these three simple rules – these three “Steps To The Great Life,” if you will – enabled them not only to stand out as beacons of hope and grace in a world of pessimism and doubt, but literally to transform 18<sup>th</sup>-century English culture and society by it. <sup>1</sup>

B—So, for the next three weeks in a new series, we’re going to be learning about these three principles, and how can we use them today to help *us* (like them) to claim “The Great Life” with God. (*In your bulletin you’ll find both a bookmark and sermon notes to remind you of what we talk about in this series...*)

–II–

5. Now, since Wesley knew that the most difficult part of Jesus’ great commandment to put into practice was “love your neighbor,” he actually focused on that part *first*, and split it into two of our three steps – the first of which we’ll talk about today: **...DO NO HARM, or... “avoid evil of every kind.”**

A—The apostle Paul puts it this way in today’s second scripture from Romans 13:9-10 (NRSV for both services), “*The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*”

B—“Do No Harm/Avoid Evil.” Now, the words are simple enough. But consistently *practicing* them in our words and behaviors is another thing entirely! <sup>2</sup>

C—Now, I’ll grant that for the most part *most* of the harm that you & I cause is *unintentional*.

1—It occurs, for instance, when we misunderstand someone else’s intentions, or we misinterpret their words or actions, or we respond with less than complete information about what’s really going on.

2—And the result is that someone gets hurt, even if we don’t mean it.

6. But there *are* other times, however, when the harm we cause is a result of our own selfishness, stubbornness, or downright deceitfulness.

A—For example, we “do harm” when we utter indiscreet words or joke about a person’s race, economic status, sexual orientation (gay or straight), the way they dress, their politics, their theology, or even the way they worship.

1—Now, we may not like or agree with something about someone else, but since they’re created in the image of God, then as followers of Jesus you and I *forfeit* the right to judge them.

2—So when you or I bad-mouth or poke fun at someone else (for whatever reason, in public or in private), we’re neither “loving our neighbor” nor reflecting the character of Christ.

B—Or... when our waiter/waitress leaves off an item from our dinner bill & we just don’t say

anything, we're "doing harm" because we're taking advantage of someone *else's* mistake.

C—When we use the TV, Internet (or even our cell phones) to view things that are inappropriate (even if "we're old enough!"), then we're "doing harm" at least to *ourselves*, setting us up for (and perhaps even continuing to be trapped by) a very dangerous and addiction.

D—When we offer alcohol at a Sunday School party, or smoke a cigar or cigarette at a church function, even though it doesn't bother us or most of our friends, then we're "doing harm" because we're not loving our alcoholic or nicotine-addicted "neighbors" enough to refrain.<sup>3</sup>

E—Or what about when we love a particular *time* or a *space* or a *style* of worship, preaching, or music *more* than having a passion for others to come to know God regardless of *how* its done, then we're "doing harm" to those who *need* to know Jesus but *can't* because of *our* inflexibility.

F—Now I could go on and on, but I've stepped on enough toes already, right? ...and you get the idea anyway: **"Doing harm" is anything that doesn't love our neighbor enough to put them and their needs first, even above our own desires or comforts.**

7. So yes, "doing no harm" is a challenging path to take because it walk goes against our very nature as human beings!

A—But even a casual reading of scripture shows that it's a path not only that Jesus *walked*, but also one that he encouraged and empowered his followers to walk, as well.

B—So, in the brief time we have left, let's talk about what it means for us as Jesus' followers to take more seriously this first simple step toward the Great Life.

–III–

8. First of all, if we want to get better at "doing no harm," then we need to learn to **SEE EVERY PERSON AS A CHILD OF GOD**... to view *every* one as a fellow recipient of the unearned, unlimited, and undeserved love and grace of God...

A—...Because when we understand that everyone is just like you and me in this regard, then we can stop applying a double standard to how we treat and deal with others.

B—For example, have you ever noticed how we humans tend to judge *others* based on their *actions and behaviors*, but want *ourselves* to be judged according to our *intentions*?

1—For instance... when someone does something that hurts *us*, they're a bad person!  
But when *we* do something that hurts someone else (even unintentionally), well... they should give us a break, because we were just having a bad day – we "didn't really mean it"! (Do you see the double standard?)

2—Or what about... when we make a joke about someone's race or sexual orientation...

it's just a joke that doesn't hurt anybody, right? But when we find out that someone has made a joke about *us*...well, they're not being fair! and they shouldn't do that, because they just don't know us!

C–In the end, you see, “doing no harm” boils right down to the “Golden Rule” most of us learned growing up (say it with me...): “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*”

- 1–If you don't want others talking bad about you, then don't talk bad about others.
- 2–If you don't want others taking advantage of you, then don't take advantage of them.
- 3–If you want others to judge you by the loving intentions *behind* your actions and behaviors, then start by looking for the loving/noble intentions behind *theirs!* <sup>4</sup>
- 4–If you want others to treat you like a child of God, then treat them the same way.

9. Now, a second way we can get better at “doing no harm” is to learn to **LIVE MORE PROACTIVELY** – that is... to think and pray *before* we speak or act.

A–Author Rueben Job says that “*To do no harm means that I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation.*” <sup>5</sup> For example,...

B–“**PBRC: Pause Before Responding to Controversy**” ...whether that controversy involves something *said* in a verbal or written message to us, or something *done* (or that we *think* was done) to us by another's actions.

- 1–In other words, avoid speaking or acting *impulsively*. <sup>6</sup>
  - (a) Don't shoot back a rash email to that person who shot you theirs.
  - (b) Don't spout back an ill-conceived word at the one who spouted it at you.
  - (c) Don't forward or pass on damaging information about others. Even if it's *true*, Christians have no business doing it – it's called “gossip”!

2–No. Pause and take a deep breath; take time to settle down, cool off, pray, and be sure you have the correct facts *before* you respond or pass things on – Don't cause further harm or misunderstanding because of your own impulsiveness! <sup>7</sup>

C–Another example of living more proactively is found in old but good cliché made popular again a few years ago: “**WWJD? What Would Jesus Do?**”

- 1–That is... for every challenging situation or circumstance we face, we need ask ourselves, “*What would Jesus do?*” and then... *do it!*
- 2–And conversely, if it's something Jesus *wouldn't* do, then *don't* do it! <sup>8</sup>

–IV–

10. You see, when we look to the Holy Spirit not only to help us begin to see every person as a

child of God (just like us), ...

A—...But also to help us live more proactively in how we face life’s challenges, then “*Doing No Harm*” becomes attainable in our daily life.

B—More than a “pipe dream,” it becomes the God-empowered first stage in our journey to Holiness – the first step towards the Great Life with God.

11. [PRAYER: *O God, forgive us for the selfish ways we’ve lived our lives that have often caused pain, hurt, and harm to others – even when it was unintentional. Thank you that even in these times, you offer us your mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Help us to offer the same to others who we feel have failed and caused harm to us. Grant us your eyes and your heart that we might see and treat others as you see and treat us – as your children; imperfect and broken, but loved and cherished deeply. And give us the power of your Holy Spirit to help us to think and pray (proactively) before we speak or act impulsively or indiscreetly, causing harm to ourselves or others. Thank you that you are always there for us. In the name of Jesus we pray all of this, Amen. ]*
12. [Talk about availability of Reuben Job’s book Three Simple Rules (for sale for \$4 in the Narthex after the service) to help you delve deeper into the steps we’ll be discussing...]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. French Historian Elie Halévy went so far as to theorize that the great influence of early Methodism among the lower classes may have actually prevented England from going through a bloody revolution similar to what occurred in France in the 1790s (the one led by Robespierre that resulted in the guillotine-deaths of thousands) [Read Elie Halévy, The Birth of Methodism in England (University of Chicago Press, 1971)].
2. In the “Walk to Emmaus” movement, this is one of the key aspects of faith that Christians are called to be accountable to. In the Walk to Emmaus weekly “Reunion Guide,” there is even a section titled “*Discipleship Denied: When was your faith tested this week through failure?*” that gives participants a chance to confess any “harm” (whether intentional or not) that they may have caused this past week.
3. God’s not a spoil-sport – He’s not just trying to keep us from pleasure or fun. To the contrary: He created fun, and He longs for us to enjoy life deeply. But He created us in such a way that the relationships we have with both Him and with others can be protected from things that can hurt us, and the boundaries he gave (the “thou shalt nots” of the Bible) are given for our *protection*, *not* to spoil our fun.
4. In other words, look for the loving/noble intention behind the actions of others, rather than presuming the worst – sometimes, whether through ignorance or inexperience, people do (or don’t do) things that upset us, or that we feel to be wrong. In these situations, try to refrain from automatically assuming that their behaviors result from bad motivation or hurtful intention. Instead, mentally put yourself in their shoes and learn to offer grace, space and (if needed) forgiveness. Give them credit for the noble intention they probably began with, even though their result may have felt less than loving.
5. Reuben P. Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), page 31.

6. The apostle Paul indicates that an impulsive spirit is a sign of spiritual immaturity (Read Galatians 5:16-25, where “self-control” is listed as a fruit of the Spirit, implying that its opposite – impulsiveness – is a work of the flesh, and not Spirit-led at all).
7. Who knows... in the pause you may even discover that how you initially planning to respond is wrong or inappropriate because the facts it was based upon are either incorrect or simply misunderstood.
8. Of course, knowing what Jesus *would* do requires us to know something about what Jesus *did* do and say, which is why staying in touch with God through an active prayer, devotional (reading the scriptures), and worship life is so important. We do these other things so that when the challenges of life come (as they inevitably will), we’ll be in a place spiritually, emotionally, and mentally where we won’t feel the need to “do harm” by our words or deeds, even if unintentionally.