

“STEPS TO THE GREAT LIFE (#3): STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD”

(Matthew 22:34-40; Colossians 2:6-7)

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–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Texts: Matthew 22:34-40; Colossians 2:6-7 and Pray.

2. For the last two weeks we’ve been sharing in the series Steps to the Great Life, in which we’ve been discussing principles of action that can help us live more happy & fulfilled lives.

A–These were first taught by Jesus in today’s first scripture in Matthew 22 (often called the “Great Commandment”) [Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it...Read Matt.22:34-40)]

B–And yet, the founder of Methodism John Wesley took Jesus’ “Great Commandment” and expounded its principles further by describing them as three “General Rules”– “steps”– for all Christians to follow in order to experience the Great Life with God: <sup>1</sup>

1–The first two help us “love our neighbor”: (#1) “*Do No Harm*”; & (#2) “*Do Good*”

2–But the third “rule/step” is what we’ll be focusing on today: **STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD** [Read Bulletin Sermon Notes and Reuben Job books in Narthex]

3. Now, even though this principle is the *last* of Wesley’s “General Rules”, it’s not because it’s *least* important – after all, Jesus listed this one *first* in His “Great Commandment,” didn’t he?

A–No. The reason that we’ve described two ways to “love our neighbor” *first* is because it’s the “low hanging fruit” of our calling, so to speak.

1– E.G., “*Doing no harm / Doing Good*” are relatively easy to achieve;

2–You don’t have to be particularly religious or spiritual to do them... *anyone* can!

B–But this *last* one requires something more: ..a willingness to do whatever it takes first to *get* – and then to *stay* – connected to God.

1–In fact, Bishop Reuben Job says that “*While the first two rules are essential, the truth is, we cannot fix on our own much of what ails us.... Only living in the... presence of GOD will bring the redemption, healing, transformation, and guidance that is so desperately needed.*” <sup>2</sup>

2–He’s really saying that it’s our doing of this *third* step that makes the first two steps even *possible*.

C–Actually, that’s the whole point of today’s second scripture (Colossians 2:6-7, NRSV): “*As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*”

D–So, how then *DO* we “*continue... rooted and built up*” in Christ? In other words, **what are some ways for us to “Stay in Love with God”?**

–II–

4. Well, I want to answer this by thinking about some parallels with the human body – specifically, what are the *necessities* the human body requires to have and sustain life?

A–You medical-types out there can add to this list, but the way I see it, there are at least three necessities: #1) *Breath*; #2) *Nourishment* (e.g., food /water); and #3) *Companionship*.<sup>3</sup>

B–Now, as Christians we believe that the *physical* things of our world often have *spiritual* counterparts, meaning that if something is true for the body, then it’s probably also true for the soul.

C–So if our bodies need breath, nourishment, and relationship to have a healthy *physical* life, it must be that there are spiritual counterparts necessary to have a healthy *spiritual* life.

1–We sometimes call these “*Means of Grace*,” or “*Spiritual Disciplines*” (John Wesley called them “*ordinances of God*”).

2–But by whatever name, they are actions that – when practiced consistently in our lives – help us connect to, and stay in love with, God.

D–So let’s think about the *spiritual* parallels to the *physical* needs I’ve mentioned so far:...

5. First of all, our need for **physical breath** reminds us of the importance of **PRAYER**, which has in fact often been called the “*breath of our spiritual lives*.”

A–And when we begin to think of prayer as spiritual “breath”, then it changes the way we understand and practice it.

1–For instance, no longer is prayer merely a way to “get” something from God, or to change God’s mind about something happening, but instead is an exercise in receiving God *Himself*.

2–Think about it: just as physical breath helps us take in the life-giving substance we call “air,” so prayer helps us take in the life-giving presence called God – it’s more about *taking in* God than about *getting* something *from* Him.

B–And that’s why prayer is not so much about changing *God* as it is about changing *us* – in the words of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century monk Brother Lawrence, prayer is nothing more than “*practicing the presence of God*.”<sup>4</sup>

C–In fact, Jesus gave us a model to use for what and how to pray – something we call “The Lord’s Prayer,”<sup>5</sup> but it’s just a skeletal structure that we can fill in with our own details.

D–And when you came in today, you were given a “*Generosity Prayer Devotion*” booklet that we invite you to use in your own prayer time to remind you of some of the aspects of God’s generosity and how it affects us – try praying one of the prayers each day.

6. Next, just as physical breath reminds us of our need for a regular practice of prayer, so our need for **physical nourishment** (food & water) reminds us of our spiritual need to regularly read and study **THE HOLY SCRIPTURES** – which is often called the “*bread of life*.”

A–You see, in the regular reading and study of God’s Word, we not only learn *about* God and how He acts and interacts with humanity, but as we read we are transformed *by* God.

B–Oh, we may not always *understand* everything in it, but that’s where the spiritual tool we’ll talk about *next* comes in.

C–Now, there are a variety of different resources that can help us develop better Bible reading habits, but the one I want to start with (if you don’t already) is use of the Upper Room Daily Devotional (*Show copy...*)

1–You can get the paper copies every two months here at church, read it online or as a daily email,<sup>6</sup> ...

2–...Or even forward and read it on your PDA or cell phone like I do.

7. Finally, our need for ***human companionship and relationship*** reminds us of our need for **CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP**, as well as for **WORSHIP and the SACRAMENTS**.

A–Think about it: the interaction we experience with other people through a *church* functions much like those in a biological *family* – that’s why it’s no accident that the church is often called the “*Fellowship*” or “*family of God*.”

B–And the same purposes of our *physical* family (e.g., to nurture and help us grow up) apply to the church as the family of *God*, as well (e.g., to support and help us grow up/mature in our faith, which is why you continually hear me say every Christian needs to be active in a small group ...so we can grow!<sup>7</sup>).

C–And just as human companionship helps us to not only *survive* but also to *thrive* by reminding us that we’re part of something bigger than ourselves, so *Christian Worship* and the *Sacraments* do the same.

1–When we come to worship or receive or watch one of the Sacraments (Holy Communion or Baptism), our focus is *not* to be on each other, or on the type or quality of music or preaching, or the method and manner of serving Communion,...

2–...but on the God who is “bigger” than any of us – the God who knows our pains and hurts and cares, and is bigger than all those things.

3–You see, our regular participation in Worship and the Sacraments remind us that God is in charge of our world no matter what – even when the rains and floods of life come, and that He alone can give comfort and peace and hope whenever we face situations & circumstances that threaten to overwhelm and “flood” our lives.

–III–

8. Now, just as we could add other items to the list of “necessities” for our *physical* bodies, so we could also add other things to this list of ways that we can “Stay In Love With God.”

A–But these are still the basics: Prayer; Scripture Reading/Study; Christian Fellowship; and participation in Worship and the Sacraments.

B–So here’s the question: How *well* – and how *often* – are you practicing these?

1–The extent of our answer them will determine the extent to which we’ll be able to “Love God” with all our heart, soul, mind and strength,...

2–...And will eventually also affect our ability to “Love our Neighbor” as ourselves.

9. So then: *Do No Harm; Do Good; Stay in Love with God*. These are the ways we can fulfill the challenge of Jesus’ “Great Commandment.”

A–The steps are simple, but the way is challenging. In my experience, only those with great *courage* will attempt it, and only those with great *faith* will achieve it. <sup>8</sup>

B–But it’s a way that God makes possible for *all* of us, <sup>9</sup> and a way that we’re *all* called to take!

C– So, will you dare to take these Steps to the Great Life with God? My hope and prayer is that you will!

10. [PRAYER: “*Lord Jesus, we confess to you that all too often we try to ‘love our neighbor’ by ‘doing no harm’ and ‘doing good’ all by ourselves, in our own human strength, and find ourselves empty and tired. Help us instead realize that without our daily connection to you as the source of life and love, we can never hope to change or transform the world around us. Help us to discipline our souls and our selves to intentionally and regularly practice ways to stay in love with you – to pray, read and study your Holy Scriptures, to fellowship with other believers, and to worship you weekly. Through these, open our eyes, mind, and heart to discover your presence, so that we may experience the great life that you desire each of us to have. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*”]

11. If you’re willing to *try* to take these “Steps” in your own life (in whatever way you feel is appropriate), I want to invite you to come forward during our closing time...

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. He referred to them as the “General Rules” of Methodism, and all the early Methodists of 18<sup>th</sup>-century England were held strictly accountable to the keeping of them.

2. Reuben P. Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 48-49. Bishop Job also says that “*The first two rules are important and bring immediate results; but without the third rule, the first two become increasingly impossible*” (Job, Three Simple Rules, p. 48).

3. For one, we *breathe* in air that contains life-giving oxygen, nitrogen, and a number of other elements that are necessary for our bodies to function. And when we cease breathing, we cease living, right? So, more than almost anything else, physical life requires breath/breathing!

But our bodies also need *nourishment* (food and water) in order to survive. We don’t have to eat or drink *as often* as we have to breath, but its still vitally important that we do because nourishment provides energy. And without energy, our bodies grow weak, our muscles begin to decay and atrophy, eventually causing our organs to cease, and we die.

Now, you might not think of *companionship* as a necessity, but talk to POWs or anyone who’s been isolated from others for a long time & they’ll describe it as a *real* necessity! You see, we humans are social creatures – created to live *not* in isolation, but in community, in healthy relationship with others; that’s why we live in *families*. In fact, science now confirms the fact that humans who live in isolation for too long develop in unhealthy ways (For example, consider the recent case of Jaycee Dugard, the California woman isolated by her kidnapper for 18 years in a backyard tent). But more than needing companionship just to *survive*, we also need it in order to *thrive* – to remind us that (in the words of poet John Donne), “*no [one] is an island,*” and that we are all part of something that’s *bigger* than ourselves.

So... breath, nourishment, and companionship are three necessities of our human bodies.

4. Brother Lawrence, The Practice of the Presence of God (written between 1640-1700; public domain).

5. Read Matthew 6:9-13.

6. Read each day’s devotion online at [www.upperroom.org/devotional](http://www.upperroom.org/devotional) , or sign up to receive it as a daily email (html or text versions available) at [www.upperroom.org/devotional/email](http://www.upperroom.org/devotional/email).

7. It’s in these small groups like Sunday School, Bible Study, a music or sports group, men’s or women’s ministry group, etc. that these functions of care and challenge are experienced.

8. My words here were inspired by a modified version of words in Bishop Job’s book, “*The rules are simple, but the way is not easy. Only those with great courage will attempt it, and only those with great faith will be able to walk this exciting and demanding way*” (Reuben Job, Three Simple Rules, p. 62).

9. “*We practice the rules, but God sends the power that enables us to keep them. We practice the rules; but God does the transforming, the renewing, and the building of the house... of our lives, of our church, and of our world*” (Reuben Job, Three Simple Rules, p. 48).