

# Three Simple Rules

A Wesleyan Way  
of Living

Rueben P. Job



# Three Simple Rules

## A Wesleyan Way of Living

---

By Rueben P. Job

Abingdon Press

Copyright © 2007 Abingdon Press

All rights reserved. ISBN: 978-0-687-64966-2

---

## Contents

Preface,  
Introduction,  
1. Do No Harm,  
2. Do Good,  
3. Stay in Love With God,  
A Guide for Daily Prayer,  
"Stay in Love With God," words and music ...,

## CHAPTER 1

### Do No Harm

*"If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." (Galatians 5:15)*

The first simple rule is "Do no harm." It is not that complicated. Even a child can understand what it means, and it is applicable to everyone at every stage of life. And when practiced, it works wonders in transforming

the world around us. Most of us have observed and experienced the struggle to resolve complex and difficult issues. I have found that when this first simple rule was remembered, it often saved me from uttering a wrong word or considering a wrong response.

I have also found that this first simple step, when practiced, can provide a safe place to stand while the hard and faithful work of discernment is done. When we agree that we will not harm those with whom we disagree, conversation, dialogue, and discovery of new insight become possible. When our words and actions are guarded by this first simple rule, we have time and space to think about consequences before a word is spoken or an action taken.

Each of us knows of groups that are locked in conflict, sometimes over profound issues and sometimes over issues that are just plain silly. But the conflict is real, the divisions deep, and the consequences can often be devastating. If, however, all who are involved can agree to do no harm, the *climate* in which the conflict is going on is immediately changed. How is it changed? Well, if I am to do no harm, I can no longer *gossip* about the conflict. I can no longer *speak disparagingly* about those involved in the conflict. I can no longer *manipulate the facts* of the conflict. I can no longer *diminish* those who do not agree with me and must honor each as a child of God. *I will guard my lips, my mind and my heart so that my language will not disparage, injure or wound another child of God. I must do no harm, even while I seek a common good.*

It may easily be believed, he who had this love in his heart would work no evil to his neighbour [sic].

It was impossible for him, knowingly and designedly, to do harm to any man. He was at the greatest distance from cruelty and wrong, from any unjust or unkind action. With the same care did he "set a watch before his mouth, and keep the door of his lips," lest he should offend in tongue, either against justice, or against mercy or truth. He put away All lying, falsehood and fraud; neither was guile found in his mouth. He spake evil of no man nor did an unkind word ever come out of his lips. ("Sermon 4, Scriptural Christianity," in *Works* , Vol. 5; page 41)

This act of disarming, laying aside our weapons and our desire to do harm, is revealing in other ways as well. We discover that we stand on common ground, inhabit a common and precious space, share a common faith, feast at a common table, and have an equal measure of God's unlimited love. When I am determined to do no harm to you, I lose my fear of you; and I am able to see you and hear you more clearly. Disarmed of the possibility to do harm, we find that good and solid place to stand where together we can seek the way forward in faithfulness to God.

When this first step is *not* taken, it usually is not because it is misunderstood or because it is too simple. More often it is a step not taken because it demands too much in the way of self-discipline and a very deep faith *that God will empower and lead the faithful*. To agree to take this first step is for many of us to agree with a theology and a practice too rigorous for our timid and tame commitment. If this step is so simple and so easily understood, why then do so many do so much harm? Because it is not an easy rule; and it does demand a *radical trust* in God's presence, power, wisdom, and guidance and a *radical obedience* to God's leadership. Practicing our faith in the world requires our deepest resolve, our greatest faith, our unwavering trust, and a very, very large measure of God's grace.

A second reason why this step is not taken may be that we have bound ourselves to a certain ideology or theology rather than binding ourselves to Jesus Christ as both Savior and Lord of all. We may have permitted our loyalty to a theological position to trump our loyalty to Jesus Christ. We may be so sure that "our way" is the right and only way that we cannot even consider that God's way could be different than our own. We have forgotten the importance of understanding clearly the God with whom we engage when we choose to follow the way of Jesus. To abandon the way of the world and follow the way of Jesus is a bold move and requires honest, careful, and prayerful consideration. It is not an inconsequential decision. Jesus himself told us to consider carefully the cost of discipleship: "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ... So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:28, 33).

To follow Jesus is to follow a God made known in Scripture, history, nature, our innermost self, and— most of all—in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To follow Jesus is to follow One who fully trusts in God's goodness, love, and intimate involvement in the affairs of humankind. To follow this Jesus is to desire to be like him in our living and our dying. For some of us, that choice is just too frightening and too demanding; so we follow at a distance or turn away. But deep in the silence of our hearts, we know we do want to follow Jesus. We do know that following Jesus is the best and only way for us to live fully and faithfully. We really do know that it is the only way to live a peaceful, joyful, fruitful life. Deep in our hearts we know that this is the life we want. We do want to follow Jesus, even if it means giving up our favorite position or our favorite possession; and so we pray for grace to be faithful as we say yes to the invitation to faithfulness.

There may be another reason why we overlook this basic building block of Christian living—we are afraid of its consequences. To abandon the ways of the world for the way of Jesus is a radical step. While this step is very simple and easily understood, it is not easily achieved. We realize it may lead us where we do not wish to go. Are we really ready to give up political power for the power of God's love? Are we ready to give up our most cherished possession—the certainty that we are right and others wrong? Can we trust God enough to follow the ways of the Spirit rather than the ways of the world? If we choose to follow this way, will we be seen as weak and at the mercy of others rather than as powerful and in control of every situation? If we choose this way, will our position be eroded and our point lost? The risk seems so great and often our fears speak so much louder than our faith.

Is it possible to live in this complex and violent world *without* doing harm? Are we supposed to turn the other cheek to those who distort the truth by selective use of the facts of any given situation? Is it wise to do no harm to those who seek to harm us, our future, or our reputation? Are we able to limit our response to a way that is not destructive to those who use false and violent words that seek to harm and destroy us? Is it possible to speak the truth in love and gentleness when others seem to speak partial truth in anger and hatred?

It is a challenging path to walk. Yet, even a casual reading of the gospel suggests that Jesus taught and practiced a way of living that did no harm. His life, his way of life, and his teaching demonstrated so well this first simple rule. And rather than inventing something new, John Wesley picked up on what Jesus taught and incorporated it into his structure for faithful living:

Keep close, I beseech you, to every means of grace. Strive to walk in all the ordinances and commandments of God blameless ... "Add to your faith virtue; to virtue knowledge; to knowledge temperance; to temperance patience; to patience godliness; to godliness ... kindness; to ... kindness charity." ("Journal from May 6, 1760, to October 28, 1762," in *Works*, Vol. 3; page 88)

There are many reasons why we find it difficult to embrace the first of these three simple rules. But the good news is that we don't have to make this journey alone. There is always One who stands there with us. And not only stands there but invades us with Spirit Presence and Power to practice our faith with integrity and in fidelity to the One we seek to follow. This truth is at the heart of the Incarnation and of Pentecost. The good news is that it is possible to practice a way of living that is in harmony with the life of Jesus and survive, even thrive, in a world like ours. It is both a challenging and rewarding way to live; and each of us, with God's help, can live such a life fully, faithfully, and joyfully.

Wesley said that to continue on the way of salvation, that is living in harmony with God, we should begin "by doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced" (*Discipline*, 2004; 103). But Wesley was not alone in his insight about this essential element of any faithful response to Jesus Christ.

Thomas á Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ* shows great concern about the ease with which we slip into sinful response in our relationships with others. In his translation of this classic book, William C. Creasy interprets

the author's concern as follows:

We cannot trust ourselves too much, because we often lack grace and understanding. The light within us is small, and we soon let even this burn out for lack of care. Moreover, we often fail to notice how inwardly blind we are; for example, we frequently do wrong, and to make matters worse, we make excuses about it! Sometimes we are moved by passion and think it zeal. We condemn small things in others and pass over serious things in ourselves. We are quick enough to feel it when others hurt us—and we even harbor those feelings—but we do not notice how much we hurt others. A person who honestly examines his own behavior would never judge other people harshly. (*The Imitation of Christ: A Timeless Classic for Contemporary Readers* (Ave Maria Press, Inc., 2004); page 69)

What would it mean if we took this first simple rule seriously? First of all, it would mean an examination of the way we live and practice our faith. And if this examination were thorough, it would surely lead to a change in the way we practice our faith. To do no harm is a proactive response to all that is evil—all that is damaging and destructive to humankind and God's good creation, and therefore, ultimately destructive to us. To adopt this first simple rule as our own is a giant step toward transforming the world in which we live.

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. As did John Wesley and those in the early Methodist movement before me, I too will determine every day that my life will always be invested in the effort to bring healing instead of hurt; wholeness instead of division; and harmony with the ways of Jesus rather than with the ways of the world. When I commit myself to this way, I must see each person as a child of God—a recipient of love unearned, unlimited, and undeserved—just like myself. And it is this vision of every other person as the object of God's love and deep awareness that I too live in that loving Presence that can hold me accountable to my commitment to do no harm.

Perhaps the greatest consequence of all is that we are formed and transformed to live more and more as Jesus lived. And this personal transformation leads to transformation of the world around us as well. As two people in a long and successful marriage begin to think, act, and even look like each other, so those who practice this simple rule begin to think, act, and perhaps even look like Jesus. It is a gigantic step toward living the holy life that brings healing and goodness to all it touches. This simple step will change your life in good and wonderful ways, but there is more.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Do Good**

*"Whoever does good is from God." (3 John 11b)*

*"God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good ..." (Acts 10:38)*

*"You owe your conscience to God; to one another you owe nothing but mutual love." (Letters of Saint Augustine, trans. John Leinenweber (Triumph, 1992); page 182)*

There is scarce any possible way of doing good, for which here is not daily occasion.... Here are poor families to be relieved: Here are children to be educated: Here are workhouses, wherein both young and old gladly receive the word of exhortation: Here are the prisons, and therein a complication of all human wants. ("Journal from August 12, 1738, to November 1, 1739," in *Works*, Vol. 1; page 181)

Now things begin to get even more complicated. Just when we thought we were ready to buy into the idea of not doing harm to anyone or anything, we are faced with an even more difficult choice. Once again, we

remember the words of Jesus, "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28). To do good is a serious challenge from Wesley and a direct command from Jesus. But what does it mean for me to "do good"? It does sound simple, but where do I begin? What are the boundaries, the limits? Is this simple admonition too difficult for me? What does it mean? What does doing good look like in our divided, hostile, and wounded world?

We are not the first to ask the question. Wesley was confronted with the same challenge and he found a reasonable way to respond:

... this commandment is written in his heart, "That he who loveth God, love his brother also." And he accordingly loves his neighbour [sic] as himself; he loves every man as his own soul. His heart is full of love to all mankind, to every child of "the Father of the spirits of all flesh." That a man is not personally known to him, is no bar to his love; no, nor that he is known to be such as he approves not, that he repays hatred for his good-will. For he "loves his enemies;" yea, and the enemies of God, "the evil and the unthankful." And if it be not in his power to "do good to them that hate him," yet he ceases not to pray for them.... ("The Character of a Methodist," in *Works*, Vol. 8, page 343)

The words of Jesus and of Wesley suggest that doing good is a universal command. That is, doing good is not limited to those like me or those who like me. Doing good is directed at everyone, even those who do not fit my category of "worthy" to receive any good that I or others can direct their way. This command is also universal in that no one is exempt from it.

Doing good, like doing no harm, is a proactive way of living. I do not need to wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide some needed help. I do not need to wait until circumstances cry out for aid to relieve suffering or correct some horrible injustice. I can decide that my way of living will come down on the side of doing good to all in every circumstance and in every way I can. I can decide that I will choose a way of living that nourishes goodness and strengthens community.

This way of living will require a careful and continual assessment of my life and the world in which I live. It will require an even more bold and radical step than not doing harm to those who may disagree with me and even seek to harm me. For now I am committing myself to seeking good for everyone in my world and everyone in God's world. Even those little offenses, like cutting in ahead of me in traffic, to the large offenses, such as considering me less than a child of God, can never move me outside the circle of goodness that flows from God to me and through me to the world. Every act and every word must pass through the love and will of God and there be measured to discover if its purpose does indeed bring good and goodness to all it touches.

Now, I am willing to do a little good, maybe even give another couple of hundred dollars to my congregation, and now and then give a contribution to Habitat for Humanity, or the local food bank; but tell me, where are the boundaries? Will the demands for my time, my influence, and my money become overwhelming? Even I can see that this could quickly get out of hand and, before I know it, my whole life is given away. I am not sure I am willing to live in such an uncontrolled situation. Perhaps *control* is the dominant word here.

There are obstacles to this way of living, and at the top of the list may be my desire to be in control. I like to know where I am going, and I like to know what it will cost to get there. That is why doing all the good I can is such a frightening idea. The needs of the world, my community, my congregation, my family are so great that if I were to do all the good I could, I might feel compelled to give everything away for some good cause. Would that be the right thing to do? Even if it were the right thing to do, could I do it? I already have too many responsibilities, too many commitments, and too many others who depend upon me.

*(Continues...)*

---

Excerpted from **Three Simple Rules** by **Rueben P. Job**.

Copyright © 2007 Abingdon Press. Excerpted by permission of Abingdon Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or

reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.  
Excerpts are provided by Dial-A-Book Inc. solely for the personal  
use of visitors to this web site.

---