

"THE GREAT LIFE (#1): DO NO HARM"  
 (Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9-10)  
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[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-6-23]

--I--

1. [11am ONLY... Read Texts (NRSV): Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:9-10 and Pray.]
2. We all want to have a "great life," don't we? ...to be successful, have good marriages, friendships, and family relationships, own nice homes and cars, and be healthy, wealthy and wise. <sup>1</sup>

A--Yet, if we're a person of Christian faith, we 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.

B--So, what does it take to have THAT kind of great life? And how do we go about practicing it daily?
3. Well, in today's first scripture (Matthew 22:34-40), Jesus is actually questioned about the character and nature of that kind of life with God.
 

[9am ONLY... Let me read that scripture, "*34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' 37 He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.*"

A--Notice [here/there] that though the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus, hoping he'd give some clever statement of faith about what we need to *adopt*, or recite some propositional creed to *believe*,...

B--...Instead, he shares two simple *guides* for his followers to *ACT UPON*. We know them today collectively as "*The Great Commandment*" (i.e., "Love God; Love your neighbor").
4. 1700 years later, the founder of Methodist Christianity John Wesley took these two 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* principles of *Jesus* & make them into *three*!)

A--But we can't argue with the results, because the early Methodists' *practice* of these three simple rules -- three steps to "*The Great Life*," if you will -- enabled them not only to stand out as beacons of hope in a world of doubt, but literally to transform 18<sup>th</sup>-century English culture by it. <sup>2</sup>

B--So, in a new series we're beginning today, I want us to spend time learning about these 3 principles, and how can we use them to help *us* (like them) to find & claim "*The Great Life*" with God. <sup>3</sup>

--II--

5. Now, since Wesley knew that the easiest part of Jesus' great commandment for everyday folk 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):

*"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." The words are simple enough. But as most of us know, consistently *practicing* them in our lives is another thing entirely! <sup>4</sup>

6. Now, I'll grant that *most* of the harm that you and I cause is *unintentional*. <sup>5</sup> But there *are* other times when the harm we cause is a result of our own selfishness, stubbornness, or sometimes downright deceit.

A--For example, we "do harm" when we utter indiscreet words or joke about a person's race, economic status, sexual orientation, the way they dress, their politics, theology, or even the way they worship. <sup>6</sup>

B--OR... when our waiter/waitress leaves off an chargeable item from our dinner bill, and we 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 smart phones or tablets) to view things that are unhealthy or inappropriate, then we're "doing harm" at least to *ourselves*, setting us *up for* (and perhaps even continuing to be *trapped by*) things that can be/become dangerous addictions.

D--Do we realize that 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 *ous* or most of our friends, we're "doing harm" because we're not loving our alcoholic or nicotine-addicted neighbors enough to refrain. <sup>7</sup>

E--And while I know it wasn't always intentional, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some Christians "did harm" to their neighbors by refusing to wear a mask or be vaccinated, asserting that their "rights" were more important than protecting the health and well-being of their neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

F--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.

G--I could go on, but I've stepped on enough toes already, am I 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 *ahead* of our own desires.**

7. So, even though it sounds simple, "doing no harm" is actually quite a challenging path because it goes against our very nature as human beings!... it requires us to be self-LESS, rather than self-ISH!

A--Yet, it's a path not only that Jesus *walked*, but also one that he invited his followers to walk, too.

B--So, in the time we have left, I want to talk about what it means for us as Jesus' followers to take more seriously this first simple step toward the Great Life. To do that, I want to suggest just two things: ...

--III--

8. First, 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, lest we end up applying a double standard to how we treat and deal with others.

A--I remember learning this the hard way in an incident nearly 40 years ago when, as a Christian student attending a Christian college, I had a habit every so often of going down to the Chapel in the evenings to pray and spend time with God.

1--One night, I went there and found the doors locked, with a sign on them saying that the Chapel was closed for a function by one of our sororities.

2--Well, I wasn't Greek myself, so I thought, "*Who does this sorority think that it is... locking people out of God's house so that they could conduct some silly, godless Greek ritual!*" I was irritated and mad, and thought really bad things about the people in there!

3--The next day I was talking with someone about it and they remarked, "*Oh, you didn't know what that was? ...Several members of that sorority recently gave their lives to Christ, and last night in the Chapel, they were being baptized.*"

4--Wow! How wrong I had been! And yet, how quick I had been to judge their actions and fail to see them as children of God! Well, I learned my lesson!

B--Yet, don't we ALL do this kind of quick judgement from time to time?

1--We judge *others* based on *their actions and behaviors*, and yet we want *others* to judge *us* based on our *intentions*.

2--Example: we see a mother yelling at her child at the grocery store, & we immediately think "*That's a bad mom!*" Yet, when we do something similar, we want people to give us a break because, after all, "*I was having a bad day because... I'd just been laid off, or lost a loved one, or got a bad medical diagnosis!*" <sup>9</sup> (do you hear the double standard?)

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 learn to look for the loving/noble intentions behind *theirs!* <sup>10</sup>

4--If you want others to treat you like a child of God, then treat them the same way.

9. 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>11</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 even *think* was done) to us by the actions of another.

1--In other words, avoid speaking or acting *impulsively*. <sup>12</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*, we Christians have no business doing it -- it's called "gossip"!

2--No. We need to pause and take a deep breath; take time to settle down, cool off, pray, and be sure we have the correct facts *before* we respond or pass things on -- we don't need to cause *further* harm or misunderstanding because of *our own* impulsiveness! <sup>13</sup>

C--Another example of living more proactively is found in the old (but good) cliché made popular a number of 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>14</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 lives.

B--More than a "pipe dream," it becomes the God-empowered first stage in our journey towards 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, Amen.* ]

### **ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> To have this kind of "great life," many of us turn to a TV personality, we read self-help books, workout at the gym, and seek advice from our Friends & Followers on Facebook and Twitter.

<sup>2</sup> 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)].

<sup>3</sup> While the three main themes in this series were first penned by John Wesley, founder of Methodist Christianity, many of the points I'm making under them each week are inspired by (or based upon) comments by now-deceased Methodist Bishop Reuben P. Job in his book [Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), available from [Cokesbury.com](#) or [Amazon.com](#).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> It happens, for instance, when we misunderstand someone else's intentions, or misinterpret their words or actions, or we respond with less than complete information about what's *really* going on. And the result is that someone gets hurt, even if we don't *mean* to cause harm.

<sup>6</sup> 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. 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> During that pandemic, some people insisted that their "rights" not to wear a mask or to get vaccinated were more important than their exercise of self-sacrificing love to help protect their neighbors. But the last time I checked, Christianity is not about *asserting* our rights, but about *surrendering* our rights for the good of *others*.

<sup>9</sup> 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! & they shouldn't do that, because they just don't know us! So the next time your boss yells at you, or someone cuts you off on the freeway, or someone at church says or does something that makes you mad -- before you convict them prematurely -- mentally step back and remember that they are a child of God just like you, and that you might not know all that's going on in their lives. It *may* not *excuse* what they did (or are doing), but it *neither* does it give us the right to judge or strike them back, either.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Reuben P. Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), page 31.

<sup>12</sup> 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).

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> 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.