

3 Simple Rules: Do Good

A sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Hebrews 13:11-16

Matthew 25:31-40

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Becoming an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church understandably requires academic study of the Christian faith. Ask any seminarian and they will tell you, no matter how prepared they thought they were, that first year of classes is always full of surprises. One thing that struck me in my theological journey was how our faith is defined by tension. You might expect doctrine to be about hard and fast rules, concrete positions, and dichotomies of "either-or," choices. Instead, Christian theology is rooted not in positions on either extreme, or even a compromise in the middle, but of a dynamic tension between two things.

Confused? Let me give you a few examples. Is Jesus human or divine? Our theology does not take either position, or even what would be described as a middle ground of half-human, half divine. Our theology teaches that he is both fully human and fully divine. His humanity and divinity are held in tension. Has God's Kingdom come? On the one hand, Christ said the Kingdom of God is within us and, through his death and resurrection, he has won victory. On the other hand, we are waiting Christ's return, and our communion liturgy says He will come in "final victory." A lot of theologians say God's kingdom is the *already* and the *not yet*. We hold those two things in tension. It's there in the ways that we practice our faith. Are we supposed to do good deeds publicly or privately? Some scriptures tell us to be a city on a hill letting our deeds shine before others. Other scriptures tell us to do good in secret so our reward is in heaven. Must we choose one or the other? In reality, we hold these two in tension.

Today's scriptures offer still another example of this tension: are we saved by works or by faith? In his soteriology, the Apostle Paul insists that we are saved not by works but by faith so that none may boast. Our official denominational doctrine is that we are saved by faith and called to do good works. In fact, this has been the dominant theological position across the church for centuries. Yet, some scriptures hint at something else. James says that faith without works is dead. And then, there's our gospel lesson for today.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples not only that they should do good to their neighbors, but that this is ultimately how they will be judged by God. Jesus relays a parable about separating the sheep from the goats. He then says that God will separate those who helped their neighbors from those who didn't. Those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison will be welcomed into the

Kingdom because, as they did for the least of these, so they did for Jesus himself. On the other hand, those who refused to hear the cry of the needy, who sent folks away hungry, who failed to visit the sick and those in prison will be sent to eternal punishment. In this well-known and often quoted passage, Jesus seems to be saying it is our works that will decide our salvation.

I remember one particularly salient point my professor made in seminary. We were learning about the church's historic creeds – the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, etc. She pointed out that, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus offers the beatitudes. The central preaching moment from Jesus is all about what you should do and be. When the church wrote its creeds two hundred years later, they only wrote about what to think and believe. The emphasis on action had been lost.

I'm not trying to undermine centuries of Christian doctrine by telling you that we are saved by works. I am, however, suggesting that there is a lot more nuance to the question of faith and works. I'm suggesting it might be another situation where we are called to hold two things in tension. I'm also speaking to you as United Methodists because, I believe, the central calling of John Wesley's life and ministry was to restore some balance between these two things. His calling was to challenge the church to put its beliefs into action.

Most Christian denominations arose because of conflict about theology and organization. Lutherans separated from the Catholic church over theological issues like the sale of indulgences and organization disputes – the loyalty due the church in Rome. Baptists separated from other protestants over a theological dispute. They believed in adult or believer baptism and rejected infant baptism. Most churches can point to an argument like these as their moment of genesis. Methodists are an outlier. John Wesley did not object to the Church of England. He was not opposed to its leadership structure or its theology. Wesley's distinction was zeal. He agreed with everything they believed, he wanted to see the church's ordinary members live into that calling more fully. For him, the church had grown too focused on encouraging right belief and had lost sight of encouraging right action. So, he created a movement around doing. That is our heritage.

It's reflected in his General Rules – the inspiration behind this sermon series. As the movement expanded, as new bands sprouted up across England, Wesley realized they needed some guidance. He offered three general rules: do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God. Notice the verbs – He says to do! He says to attend to! A few weeks ago, Gary wore a t-shirt that said, "church is a verb." Wesley would agree. Now, to be clear, Wesley believed we are saved by faith. His general rules are for Methodists – people who have already affirmed their belief in Jesus Christ. His point

was that believing should naturally lead to doing. Once you believe the message is not simply, “keep believing,” but also, “start doing.”

That is important for the church and its important for individuals. We are called to hold faith and works in tension, but we can all fall into the bad habit of overemphasizing one or the other. There are folks so caught up in mission activities – so stressed by the life of the church – that they do not have time for worship and study. There are many folks who devote long hours to study but never set out to practice what they learn. When I was starting out in ministry, I met with folks from Lorain Lighthouse UMC and they talked about their plan for holding these things in tension. They encouraged everyone to have their three. They should have at least one worship service they attended regularly, they should have one small group or Bible study they attended regularly, and they should have one missional project they worked with regularly. They encouraged people to have all three, but they also discouraged people to overcommitting to too much more than those three. Above all, they wanted to maintain balance between worshipping, learning, and living the faith.

A few years ago, some members of my church came to me with a challenge. They recognized our church’s historic leadership in the movement for racial justice and harmony and they wanted to find ways to engage in antiracism work in the local parish. I phoned up our conference director of multicultural vitality and asked for a meeting. We sat down and talked about ways folks in the local church could get more involved. He asked a poignant question. Do folks in this church want to do racial justice work, or do they want to start a racial justice book club? I asked what he meant and he explained that, again and again, when he worked with white allies, they rapidly embraced the academic study of racial justice, but seldom reached out beyond their church in a meaningful way. It is important to learn and to tackle our own prejudices internally, but it can’t end there. It’s not enough to just believe the right things, we have to do them. He sounded a lot like James – Faith is great, but faith without works is dead.

I think people can feel that, too. At Greensburg UMC, I worked with lay members to found a Social Principles group. I noticed I was doing a lot of ministry around anxiety about the state of the world and of the country. Individually, parishioners came to my office to express their fears about the environment, the rights of migrants and refugees, the safety of family members in the LGBTQIA+ community, and cuts to support for people living poverty both in the US and the developing world. Their anxieties were rooted in the teachings of our church. The United Methodist Church has a list of social principles that guide our public ministry in the world.