

## **STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD**

A 3-Simple-Rules Sermon Series Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Psalm 105:1-4 (Psalm 34:8)  
Colossians 2:1-6 (John 21:15-17)

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Our sermon series on John Wesley's 3 Simple Rules for Living began and now ends with a very basic question. Do you desire to live a good and faithful life in Christ? If responding "yes" to this question we then find ourselves standing before the simply stated and yet difficult Great Commandment, "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Lk 10:27) This Law of love may be fairly easy to memorize and remember in comparison to the hundreds of laws that the faithful were supposed to remember and practice in Jesus' day. And yet, the practice of such love wasn't easy in Jesus' day. It wasn't easy in John Wesley's day. It still isn't easy in our day.

John Wesley experienced for himself and saw in others this struggle to embrace love and live a good and faithful life in Christ. So he laid out 3 simple rules to help average, everyday people of faith to live by the Law of Love – "do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God." I know you've already been hard at work incorporating the practices of doing no harm and doing good into your daily life. If you've taken those rules to heart, I'm sure you've also experienced some difficulty living them. It will take a lot of conscientious practice for those two rules to become a natural, normal way to live our lives every day. But it's time now to move on to the third rule – a rule that will actually help us to better accomplish the first two. Wesley's actual descriptive phrase for his third simple rule was "attending upon all the ordinances of God."

Ordinance is a strange word to our ears when it comes to faith. I think it's a term we most often associate with those decisions made by local councils and municipalities concerning the day in and day out practice of living together in a community. But to John Wesley, it was a word that described the day in and day out practices that kept the relationship between God and humans vital, alive and growing. These ordinances were the practices that built up and nourished a strong and growing love relationship with God. Wesley named practices such as public worship, the Lord's Supper, private and corporate prayer, searching the Scriptures, Bible study, fasting, sacrificial giving, serving others and Christian fellowship as essential to faithful living. Wesley personally practiced and he encouraged all those who regularly gathered in small Methodist groups of spiritual accountability to engage in these practices. But the consistent and heartfelt engaging in these "ordinances" kept the faithful connected to the presence and power of Christ. These practices reassure us of God's love for us, help us stay in love with God, and prepare us to be vessels of God's love to others.

From Psalm 105 (vs. 4) we hear these words, "Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually." From Psalm 34 (vs. 8) we hear, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." These beautiful verses tell us to "seek, taste, and see." Action is required, effort is clearly needed. Do you so desire to know the Lord's presence that you daily seek his presence? Do you find the things of God so mouth-watering that you crave the taste and will do whatever it takes to encounter the living God in your day to day life?

Whereas most of us might quickly acknowledge the importance of spiritual practices or disciplines when asked, we may also need to admit that our lack of taste

for them has us struggling to incorporate them into our daily lives. This may partially be because our busy, schedule driven lives consume our daily time. Of course, it may also mean we just don't consider it that important, since we do tend to make time for those things we consider important. It could be we find excuse in the fact that Jesus clearly revealed God's love for us and since we are able to fairly easily declare our love for God, we like to think that's enough. And yet, we have witnessed and even know from personal experience that it is a disciplined routine that makes an athlete excel and a musician extraordinary, and a professional successful. It is no less true that it is a disciplined spiritual routine that makes us into good and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Several years ago a certain young man from Ohio started attending a church regularly only because the woman he married asked him to come with her. He went, but was not much interested in religion. However, that started to change. He was eventually drawn into God's Word. He began a daily prayer life and then started purchasing commentaries and Bible helps to enable him to understand scripture better. He even decided to join a Sunday School class. God had been there all along, inviting that young man to know Him. The Bible had been there all along waiting to nourish his soul. But now, the flavor of God's word had become delicious to him. He craved it; he sought it. He sought God's presence, and as his experience and understanding grew, his love for God and others also grew. God had not changed, the Bible had not changed, but by engaging in spiritual disciplines he opened himself to God in ways he could not have imagine back when he simply attended worship in response to his wife's invitation.

Consider the actions and thoughtful gestures in which you and I engage when we love someone. The investing of our time and energy is something we want to do and those things draw us closer to the one we love. Isn't it true that marriages and other close relationships start to break down when we no longer spend time with the other person, when kindness and thoughtfulness are no longer practiced, when open communication ceases, when what's important to the other person is no longer valued, and when apathy and misunderstanding prevail? When we start taking someone in our lives for granted our relationship with that person is likely in trouble. How many of us here today take our relationship with God for granted? I'm thinking it might be quite a few of us!

"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." (Colossians 2:6-7) Living in Christ means being rooted in his ways; it means knowing and living by his teachings. Living in Christ is to acknowledge His daily presence and then allow that presence to challenge, change and build us up. Living in Christ is to embrace for those ways of faith we have seen lived out in others and which we ourselves were taught. Living a good and faithful life is not about understanding the basics of church government and appreciating the flow of certain church rituals or even knowing denominational history – such things may inspire and even excite us but they are not actually the things that matter most because those things change from time to time and from place to place. The one mark that distinguishes a good and faithful life in Christ is love – love for God and love for others.

Do you remember when Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Then "Feed my lambs." "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Then "Tend my sheep." "Simon son of John, do you love me?" "Yes Lord, you know

everything, you know that I love you." Then "Feed my sheep." (John 21:15-17) Jesus asks us that same question today, "Do you love me?" And of course, there really is only one answer to that question. "Yes Lord, you know that I love you!"

If that is your answer, like it was Peter's answer, then the next question becomes are you willing to embrace for your life the way of love? This simple but costly way means doing no harm, doing good, and staying in love with God. Considering what an extremely disciplined man John Wesley was when it came to living a good and faithful life, and how he encouraged others in his day who called themselves Methodist to also live good and faithful lives. I imagine Wesley encouraging each one of us as today's Methodists to make this high and holy choice new every morning as we awake with a heartfelt desire and determination to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. The disciplines of faith are those practices, those special things we do that strengthen our relationship with God, and therefore enable us to walk the demanding, difficult, exciting, life changing and world transforming way of love.

Wesley's third simple rule challenges us to stay in love with God by embracing the spiritual disciplines. You know those practices and I'm sure you can name, but let me help you out... public worship, the Lord's Supper, private and communal prayer, reading the Scriptures, Bible study, fasting, sacrificial giving, serving others, and Christian fellowship. Staying in love with God may be Wesley's third rule, but that does not mean it is a lesser rule. All three of the rules are tightly bound together. If we don't attend to our relationship with God, it is unlikely we will have the strength or desire to do no harm and to actively do good. So, with that in mind, let us pray...

*"Loving Lord and Teacher, come and make your home in our hearts this day. Dwell within us all day long and save us from error or foolish ways. Teach us today to do no harm, to do good, and assist us so that we may stay in loving relationship with you and our neighbor. Help us today to be an answer to another's prayer so that we may be one of your signs of hope in the world you love." Amen. (That prayer is in the little brown book titled Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living that I told you about last week and that is now available. It's a prayer that is meant to be prayed every day.)*