

Three Simple Rules: Stay in Love with God

3/3 of "Three Simple Rules"

Colossians 2: 6-7

02-22-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

A couple was preparing to celebrate their **40th anniversary**. The wife was busy cleaning the kitchen while her husband sipped some coffee. He suddenly looked up from reading the newspaper and asked, "What is the traditional gift for a 40th anniversary?" The woman paused in her work and answered, "Ruby."

A few minutes passed and he asked, "What about the 25th anniversary?" She stopped again and said, "Silver."

Moments later he asked, "Then what is the 30th?" The wife impatiently answered, "Pearl." And before he could ask, she added, "35th is jade and 45th is sapphire."

Just when she got back to work, he asked, "Then what will our 50th anniversary be?" With great exasperation, the woman declared, "It will be A BLESSED MIRACLE!"

I. A Blessed Miracle

The Bible tells the **love story** between God and his people. Scripture reveals a covenant making, covenant keeping God in love with a covenant making, covenant breaking people. Despite our unfaithfulness, the Lord's love never fails.

The Scriptures describe God's relationship with us in a rich variety of ways: parent and child, shepherd and sheep, potter and clay, king and subject, master and servant, teacher and student, friend and friend.

The Bible also uses the imagery of **marriage**. In the Old Testament, God is the husband and Israel the wife. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the groom and the church the bride. In fact, a traditional wedding ceremony begins with the statement: "*Marriage is an honorable estate instituted by God and signifying the mystical union that exists between Christ and his church.*"

The Lord God Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, is head-over-heels in love with his creation. God loves us with the jealousy of teenagers, the passion of newlyweds, and the fidelity of a couple celebrating their 50th anniversary. God's love for us IS a blessed miracle that we celebrate today.

Today I am concluding a three part series entitled ***Three Simple Rules***. During the past two weeks, we have heard how a group of Christians approached John Wesley, seeking his help to follow a Christian life. The founder of the Methodist movement organized the believers into "classes" of twelve people that met weekly. He also devised three simple guidelines that he called "**The General Rules**:"

Do no harm.

Do good.

Stay in love with God.

"**Do no harm**" describes the Christian ethic in the negative—it tells us what NOT to do. God's law defines the boundaries of holy living. When we ignore these *No Trespassing* signs and wander out of bounds, then someone always gets hurt.

“**Do good**” describes the Christian live in the positive—it tells us what to do. We are called to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Love speaks no language of limits. We seek to love as God loves.

Today we are examining Wesley’s third rule: “**Stay in love with God.**”

II. Stay in Love with God

In order to stay in love with God, we must first **fall in love with God**. For some, this is a dramatic “love at first sight” moment when they accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Some can name the time and place of their salvation. For others, it is a gradual deepening of a lifelong relationship. I heard one person testify, “I don’t recall a time when I was NOT a Christian.”

Our Creator seeks to be in relationship with the people he loves. Time and again our Lord sends us **love notes** with the declaration “I love you” accompanied by the question “Do you love me?” Time and again we respond by checking “Yes,” “No,” or “Maybe.” Those who answer God’s call enter into a life-changing relationship. In Christ, we are new creations—the old has passed away and the new has come.

However, a married couple knows that the wedding day is just the beginning of a marriage. We are called to a lifetime of faithfulness and dedication to God. Like any relationship, this requires an inordinate amount of time, effort, and attention. Otherwise, a once vital relationship can wither and die.

In today’s Scripture lesson, Paul wrote to the church: “*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*” Note the words “CONTINUE to live in him.” The emphasis is upon staying in constant relationship with Christ.

In John 15, Jesus told his disciples: “*Abide in me, and I will abide in you.*” The word “**abide**” is also translated as “*remain*” and “*live in.*” Jesus illustrated his point with an agricultural analogy. He said: “*I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*” The vine draws nutrients from the soil and provides sap to the branch. The branch abides in the vine. Cut the branch away, and it will die. Only when we stay in constant relationship with Christ can we enjoy a vital faith and produce fruit.

III. The Ordinances of God

So how do we stay in love with God? At this point, I must make a confession. Over the past weeks, I have told you that Wesley’s three simple rules were: “Do no harm,” “Do good,” and “Stay in love with God.” The third rule is *actually* a paraphrase written by Bishop Reuben Job in his book Three Simple Rules. What John Wesley REALLY said was: “**By attending upon all the ordinances of God.**” You can see why Bishop Job thought this might need a rewrite! Few people here could explain what “*the ordinances of God*” might be, much less describe how to “*attend*” them!

Synonyms for “**ordinance**” include “rule,” “regulation,” or “guideline.” It is a decree that a person in authority commands others to do. Within the context of “the

General Rules,” Wesley understood “the ordinances of God” to be **spiritual disciplines** that all disciples should practice. These “means of grace” enable us to grow in the Christian faith. Wesley included six ordinances in his list:

- ✓ *The public worship of God.*
- ✓ *The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.*
- ✓ *The Supper of the Lord.*
- ✓ *Family and private prayer.*
- ✓ *Searching the Scriptures.*
- ✓ *Fasting or abstinence.*

The six ordinances listed by Wesley are by no means exhaustive. There are many other ways that we maintain our relationship with God. Each person is created as a unique individual. Therefore, the spiritual disciplines that are meaningful to us also differ. But these six ordinances are essential for ALL believers.

IV. First Love

Despite our best intentions, sometimes we ignore these basic “ordinances of God.” Neglected relationships lose their meaning and vitality. A healthy marriage is based upon a lifetime of commitment and communication. The same is true for our relationship with God. We are called to **fall in love all over again**.

Following his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus appeared to some of his disciples on the Galilean shore. In a memorable scene from John 21, the Lord confronted Simon Peter who had denied him three times. Three times Jesus asked Simon, “*Do you love me?*” Each time Peter answered, “*Lord, you know that I love you.*” Three times Christ called the Big Fisherman to care for the church.

In ways both big and small, God asks us the same question: “*Do you love me?*” And with Simon Peter, we would answer, “*Lord you know that I love you.*” But suppose the Lord got more specific and asked questions about “the ordinances of God:”

- ✓ How often do you gather with other believers in public worship?
- ✓ Are you involved in a Bible study, Sunday School class, or other small group setting to learn more about God’s Word?
- ✓ Do you regularly receive the Lord’s Supper?
- ✓ How often and how long do you pray with your family and by yourself?
- ✓ How much time did you spend in personal Bible study this past week?
- ✓ When was the last time you fasted or abstained from something other than food?

In the opening chapters of Revelation, Jesus addressed seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor. In Revelation 2, Jesus praised the Ephesian church's ministry and faithfulness. But then the Lord wrote: "*Yet I have this against you: You have lost your first love*" (Rev. 2: 4) Christ's words are filled with a poignant loss.

Certainly the Ephesian church had once possessed a "*first love.*" In Ephesians 1: 15, Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: "*I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love . . .*" They were renowned for their love of God, one another, and others. Over the years, however, they somehow lost their first love of God.

a) Chronological

Remember the first time you fell in love. How the first moments of infatuation filled your every waking thought. First love demands our supreme devotion and all else is laid aside in its service. First love is someone we love so passionately that we would give our lives for them.

b) Priority

First in order of priority, what we give our ultimate allegiance to. First love is something we order our lives around, the bedrock foundation upon which all else is built. Do we love God with ALL of our heart, soul, mind, and strength OR with the leftovers from other affections in life?

Despite the Ephesian church's great accomplishments, the members had forgotten what was truly important. Their first love had been lost. Jesus in essence says, "You are doing a lot of great stuff around here, but you've forgotten the most important part!" So the Lord invites and commands: "*Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first*" (Rev. 2: 5).

For those who may have lost their "*first love*" of God, Jesus offers a three step recovery plan to restore the relationship.

- 1) **Remember** There is a power in remembering who we were/are/should be.
- 2) **Repent** Turn from sin and embrace holiness.
- 3) **Return** Do the things you did at first.

Conclusion

After decades of marriage, an older couple entered marital counseling. After several false starts, the wife finally identified the root of the problem. She said, "He never tells me that he loves me."

Her husband looked at her in astonishment and said, "I told you that I loved you on our wedding day. If I ever change my mind, I'll let you know!"

God never changes his mind. The Bible is God's love story of his people. The Lord God Almighty is in love with you and me. The Holy Spirit pursues and woos us.

Christ is the groom and the church his bride. Such divine love transforms our lives forever. Stay in love with God—God's love is a blessed miracle.