

Three Simple Rules

DO NO HARM James 1:19-27, 3:3-10

INTRO: In the 1700s in England, there were two very famous preachers who lived and worked at the same time

A. The Billy Grahams of their day

These two preachers traveled all over the country preaching, outdoors, in the streets, in the fields, at the mouths of coal mines,

Preaching to crowds of up to 20,000

Seeing thousands of people converted

The cultural elite and the leaders of the established church despised them

- But the common people came in droves to hear them

Two famous preachers in 18th century England

- Loved by some
- Hated by others

--But known by everyone THEN.

B. And yet today – the movement started by one of these preachers continues to change lives in every country on earth

- While the other one of these preachers is virtually unknown, except to people who have a reason to study church history.

Let's see how many of you have heard of these two preachers:

- How many have heard of George Whitefield?

- How many have heard of John Wesley?

C. So what is it that Wesley did that Whitefield didn't?

- Here's what Whitefield himself said:

“My brother Wesley acted wisely. The souls that were awakened under his ministry he joined to societies, and thus preserved the fruit of his labor. This I neglected, and my people are a rope of sand.”

- 1- Wesley and Whitefield were both great preachers, but Wesley realized that once people gave their lives to Christ, they needed structure, they needed discipline, they needed a tangible way to live out their new faith
 - And so Wesley organized his converts into societies that met every week for instruction and prayer
- 2- And he gave his societies a set of real-world guidelines to help them apply their faith to their everyday lives

He called these the General Rules of the United Societies, and they basically boiled down to 3 simple guidelines:

Do no harm
Do good
Stay in love with God

[Repeat]

D. You say, now where's that in the Bible?

Well, it's not – not in those exact words, anyway

- But I'm pretty sure that what Wesley had in mind was the Great Commandment in Matthew 22, where Jesus says,

“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.”

Jesus made things simple – not easy – but simple

And John Wesley tried to do the same thing:

- He said if you want to follow Jesus—if you want to love God and love your neighbor-- then live by these three simple rules:

Do no harm
Do good
Stay in love with God

E. Now, in John Wesley’s day, the world was changing rapidly

- The economy was changing
- Social structures were changing
- Governments were changing

And the 3 simple rules were part of what helped the early Methodists stay grounded in the midst of all that craziness

Guess what? The world we live in is changing rapidly, and I think the 3 simple rules are still amazingly relevant to us!

- So today and the next 2 Sundays, we’re going to look at John Wesley’s 3 Simple Rules:

Do no harm
Do good
Stay in love with God

LET’S PRAY

I. These are John Wesley's actual words that still appear in our United Methodist Book of Discipline:

- A. There is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these societies: "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins." But wherever this is really fixed in the soul it will be shown by its fruits.

It is therefore expected of all who continue therein that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation,

First. By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced, such as:

And he goes on to list things like...

- Drunkenness
- Fighting
- Brawling
- Slaveholding
- Buying or selling slaves
- Tax fraud
- Loan fraud
- Shady business practices
- Taking the Lord's name in vain

Now those are all things that most Christians don't do

(Or at least know we shouldn't do)

- B. But there's one method of doing harm that I'm not sure we realize we're not supposed to do
- Wesley says, "Do no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind, *especially that which is most generally practiced*"

There is a form of evil that's "most generally practiced" in society that I'm afraid also widely practiced in the church

- It's so widely practiced that we don't think it's a big deal
- But it does tremendous harm
- And it's got to stop

C. I'm talking about the harm that we do with our tongues:

- With the words we say
- The ways we talk to each other
- The ways we talk about each other
- The venom that we spew
- The negativity
- The gossip
- The sarcasm
- The insults
- The putdowns
- The back-stabbing
- The viciousness that we post on Facebook and Social Media

D. Now, you may hear the simple rule, "Do no harm," and you may think, "Well, I've never killed anybody, I've never cheated on my spouse, I've never stolen (much) – so I've never done any real harm."

But the Apostle James, in today's Scripture, says:

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. (James 1:26 NIV)

Brothers and sisters, WORDS matter

- What we say matters

- How we speak matters
- What we post on Facebook matters

Proverbs 18:21 says, “The tongue has the power of life and death.”

- Relative to its size, the tongue is the strongest muscle in the human body
- And relative to the hurt it can cause, the tongue is the most dangerous muscle in the human body.

II. One of the ways we do harm with our tongues is through Gossip:

A. Some years ago, more than 1000 firefighters battled a raging wildfire for two weeks in the Black Hills of South Dakota:

1- It was the largest wildfire in the history of the Black Hills:

Fortunately, nobody died, and only one house was burned down:

But the fire destroyed over 83,000 acres of National Forest land

- It cost \$9 million dollars to put out the fire.
- \$11 million to plant new trees and repair the roads
- The destroyed timber was valued at \$22 million

2- And it all started with one match

A woman named Janice Stevenson, 46 years old, from Newcastle, Wyoming was driving through the forest

She stopped to look at something, and she lit a cigarette

She dropped the match, got back in her car and went on her way

- And before long, 130 square miles of beautiful forest were reduced to black ash

83,000 acres destroyed by one little match.

B. Look at James 3, verse 5:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

-One little match can destroy an entire forest

-one little muscle, called the tongue, can destroy

A family
A relationship
A church
A community
A reputation

C. Some people would say that gossip is when you spread rumors that aren't true.

Gossip is actually more than that --

If I talk bad about somebody who's not present – that's gossip.

If I talk about somebody who's not present and I share things without that person's permission – that's gossip.

If I talk about somebody who's not present and I say anything with a motive of tearing that person down – that's gossip.

--What I'm saying might be true, but that doesn't mean I ought to be saying it.

D. One little match can start a fire that can destroy an entire forest.

- One little comment can start a chain of gossip that can destroy
 - a relationship
 - a church
 - a community
 - a reputation

John Wesley said, "Of all the gossiping, religious gossiping is the worst. It adds hypocrisy to uncharitableness and effectually does the work of the devil in the name of the Lord."

Ann Landers said, "People of high intelligence talk about ideas. People of average intelligence talk about things. People of no intelligence talk about other people. Where are you in the lineup?"

III. Another way we do harm with our tongues is when we say hurtful things to each other

A. Look at verse 7 of James 3:

⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

We get angry or frustrated and so we yell, scream, threaten, criticize harshly, or use bad language

- We think, "no big deal – that's how people talk."
- But James says that kind of talk is deadly poison

When you just open your mouth and say whatever comes out –

--when you let your untamed tongue just go

- You are injecting deadly poison into your relationships
 - into your family
 - into your children
 - into your workplace
 - into your community

B. John Gottmann is a famous marriage researcher

- He has studied married couples for over 30 years
- One thing he's found is that if one marriage partner speaks an unkind word to the other, it takes five positive affirmations to overcome the relational impact of that one negative statement

Which means 2 things:

- 1- If you said something nasty to your husband or wife on the way to church this morning, you'd better get busy this afternoon!
- 2- (Sad but true) The negative is five times more powerful than the positive!

--So we've really got to watch what we say!

IV. Another way we do harm with our tongues, and with our words, is through insults, put-downs and angry sarcasm

It was his first day on the job. He was a new clerk in the green goods department of a super market. A lady came up to him and said she wanted to buy half of a head of lettuce. He tried to dissuade her from that goal, but she persisted.

Finally he said, "I'll have to go back and talk to the manager."

He went to the rear of the store to talk to the manager, not noticing that the woman was walking right behind him. When he got into the back of the store, he said to the manager, "There's some stupid old bag out there who wants to buy half a head of lettuce. What should I tell her?"

Seeing the horrified look on the face of the manager, he turned about and, seeing the woman, added, "And this nice lady wants to buy the other half of the head of lettuce. Will it be all right?"

A. Now, that guy didn't realize when he was talking bad about that woman that she was standing right there--

-and many of us don't realize that when we talk bad about somebody else, we are insulting GOD.

Look at James 3, verse 9:

⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

And yet it is so, and it's become so common that it no longer bothers us

- When it comes to what we say and how we talk, we Christians are taking our cues from the rest of society
- We've become just as good at insults, sarcasm, and put-downs as the rest of society
- We seem to think that if what we say is true, then how we say it doesn't matter
- And we seem to think that politicians and leaders and public figures are not human beings, not loved by Jesus, not created in the image of God –

- So it's OK to say all kinds of nasty things about them and wish them all kinds of harm

Every political season, I am heartbroken when I see Christians using the same insults, put downs, angry sarcasm the world uses

-spewing the same venom as everybody else

You say, "Claude what's the big deal? I'm not hurting those politicians! They don't know what I said!"

- But don't you see? It's not about hurting them – it's about hurting YOU!
 - The poison coming out of your mouth damages you
- And when you post your poison on the Internet, it damages the church – and it damages Jesus.

CONCLUSION: The tongue has the power of life and death.

We do harm with our tongues

- When we gossip
- When we say hurtful things
- When we use insults, put-downs and angry sarcasm

James says, "No one can tame the tongue"

And he's right. So we need to pray.

- Maybe what we should do is every morning get up and pray
Psalm 141:3

Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips