*Three not so simple rules*

*Micah 6:8*

*8 He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

*Luke 11: 42*

*42 “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.*

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, had three simple rules that he lived by. Do no harm, do good, stay in love with God. Sounds pretty simple right?

‘It should be simple, but unless you have tried to live by these 3 rules, don’t judge the person who has tried and has fallen short.

Let’s take these rules and dissect them for a moment. Do no harm, is anybody ever truly successful at doing no harm. Most of us would say yes, I do a pretty good job at not doing any harm, I haven’t killed anybody, I haven’t caused anybody any problems, so I’m doing pretty good on the first rule. We have to ask ourselves this, have we gotten angry in the past couple of days, well that’s harm to ourselves, so then we are not good at keeping the first rule.

Rule #2 - Do good. We believe, because we aren’t intentionally doing bad, that we are doing good, right. Not necessarily so, the disciples came up to Jesus and said, Good Teacher, and Jesus immediately said why do you call me Good, no one except for the Father is Good. So, if Jesus himself said he isn’t a good person then we have truly missed the mark.

Rule #3 - Stay in Love with God. Do we really need to discuss this rule? We don’t read the Word of God like we should, we don’t pray like we should, nor do we live our lives in the holiest way like we should.’ Everything I have just repeated is a paraphrase from Rev. Neal Vick, A UMC Pastor and to not give him credit would be a version of doing harm.

Why do we bother with these antiquated rules from John Wesley? Will this increase the bottom line of our church? Will it change the culture of our community? Will we be more approachable as a resource of hope in our community? Let’s think about it for a few minutes.

The bottom line of our church should be the number of ‘confessions of faith, baptisms, church transfers – you get the picture. Just increasing the numbers in worship attendance isn’t necessarily the real bottom line for churches. The number of persons that have turned their life around and found relationship with Christ is the bottom line, but let’s not rule out the numbers since that increases the exposure for the proclamation of the Word. If we take each one of the simple rules and apply it directly to growth of the body of Christ, then a more holistic reality begins to be shaped. ‘Do no harm’, then becomes the guideline for an approach to reaching those outside and the reluctant ones inside our communities. So, how do we accomplish ‘doing no harm’? Is it necessary to repeat what has been said over and over again in sermons and writings across the years – ‘the tongue is mightier than the sword’? Do we really believe this and is this really a source of doing harm?

With the coming of social media, i.e. Facebook and the others, we have the power to get a word out to a huge public. But the question is, what word are we putting out there? Is it harmful in any fashion? Is it clear or can manipulation change the intent of what was said? Many of us will write on impulse and perhaps not make the effort to read and think through what was written. This could be labeled unintentional harm, but harm can be done. So, do we at this point just say, that isn’t what I meant! I have been told for years to say what I mean and mean what I say. This is the point, be careful how you respond to and post on social media. Your words will find a permanent home in cyberspace – ask any politician that has grown to regret writing something that should have never been written or said.

Conversation can be as contagious as the common cold! While all of us are guilty of speaking, ‘out of church’, it goes to the intent of what is said as to whether or not harm will come from it. Are the words used to demean or criticize or, are they just off the cuff and not thought through with concern? I am always amused at watching a political figure in interviews choosing so carefully their words – if not, they come back to haunt them almost immediately. Remember Proverbs “11:9, You can be ruined by the talk of godless people, but the wisdom of the righteous can save you.”

I believe the unintentional meaning ascribed to our comments comes either through misunderstanding or misinterpretation. The issue is when our words are intentional and used to cause harm or they are purposefully twisted to cause harm. I believe this to be at the heart of Wesley’s sermon thoughts on doing no harm, as well as physical harm. In a world of cyberbullying, and gossip avenues through social media, this has become a monumental problem. Church members are as guilty as those who never darken the doors. The question then becomes why? I have my own ideas about the why, and the chief reasons are as vast as the rumors themselves. So, what would Jesus have to say about this issue? Being a Rabbi, He would surely quote one of the writers or could we sum it up with his words to the lawyers when asked about the greatest commandment – ‘love your neighbor as yourself’. This might cause one to pause and apply the words personally to oneself and think about how it feels. Would you use those words on yourself? If not, why use them on another person.

We have reached a point in our church today where everything is scrutinized to put us in camps or teams. It matters which camp or team because we have become convinced that it matters. If we could all just think alike or agree – I have heard many times, everything would be ok! Well, that isn’t reality, so what do we do? Does doing good mean more than not doing bad/harm? Some scripture:

### [Galatians 6:9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Galatians+6%3A9&version=ESV)

And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

### [Psalm 37:3](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+37%3A3&version=ESV)

Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

### [Ephesians 2:10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+2%3A10&version=ESV)

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

### [2 Thessalonians 3:13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Thessalonians+3%3A13&version=ESV)

###  As for you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing good.

The subject matter is always open for discussion. I have rambled for too long trying to make a point. Let me bring it down to why I felt this subject important enough to dwell on it today. We are faced everyday with so much evil in the world we forget that in our own space we can be a source of evil. Doing no harm is no small task, the same with doing good. It takes a dedicated effort that without the presence of God in our lives is overwhelming for us. John Wesley lived in a very turbulent time in history and no doubt he felt the weight of the world resting on the uninvolved actions of the Anglican church. These rules became a source of centering for ministry. If we read the entire chapter of Luke 11, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for pretending to be good and yet living duplicitous lives.

In our own denomination today, we use such strong language to put our side of the issue forward and yet try to project our own righteousness and not consider that we could harm with just our words. We seem to believe, from both sides, that if we can win the argument, that will fix the church. One of the lessons I have learned in life is that there are always two sides to any issue and sometimes, neither one is right. Compromise has become a weakness in contemporary society’s eyes. We need only look at ourselves.

Pender has been in a serious season of change. We have seen many of our congregation disappear from our midst. I have heard many explanations as to ‘why’, but there appears to be no easy fix. What if, those of us determined to stay the course, were to choose to live out the ‘three simple rules’ fully? That in every way, we would choose to do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God. How would it change the ministry of our church? Annie and I have spent 40 years in service through the UMC and feel that our work was not in vain. I challenge each of you to pray for the strength to live out these rules and search your hearts for ways you can be more loving, more dedicated, more determined that Pender will be a shining example of Christ’s love in our community through your life. Jesus promised to be with us to the end of the age and I believe him. He alone came and paid the ultimate price to bring us into full relationship with him. Oh how he loved you and me!