

Stay in Love with God – Part 2

August 13, 2018

Matthew 6: 16-21



Tonight, we conclude our series on John Wesley's "Three Simple Rules". For the first three weeks of the series we covered the first two rules: 'do no harm' and

'do good'. Last week we began the third rule: 'stay in love with God'. This rule, if you will remember, had six ordinances or practices or habits that Wesley believed faithful Christians must make a part of their daily lives. As a reminder, here are the six ordinances: public worship, hearing the Word proclaimed, holy



communion, personal and corporate prayer, meditation on the Word, and fasting. Last week we talked about the first three and part of the fourth. This week we will shift gears to wrestle with what I consider the more

personal of the ordinances: private prayer, meditation on the Word, and fasting.

But before we get too far, I invite you to spend a little time at your table reflecting on the two questions you were asked to consider this past week.

Share with your tablemates how it went. Or in other words, were you able to worship and spend time in the Word? Did your prayer life build your love for God? Here are the questions again:



1) In what ways can you worship God each day? How can your prayer life build your love of God?

2) When will you spend time each day in His Word?

Does your commitment reflect your love of God?

In a way, these questions also prepared you for tonight's focus. Wesley was a great believer in the power of public worship; but he also believed that we should worship God in all we did and said. Wesley was a man who also believed in corporate prayer as a means to connect to and to fellowship with God. Yet Wesley also prayed a lot in private, personal conversation with God. And fasting! Wesley was quite the faster. But more on that later. Now that you have an idea of the direction of this time together, let us pray for our time together...



For Wesley, the three simple rules were intended to be just that – simple. For example, worship was not to be complicated and fancy. While Wesley grew up in and was an ordained Anglican priest, he also recognized the need for worship to be more in line with ordinary people. The revival that he began in England attracted those who would not attend “high church” and who would certainly not be welcomed there either. Wesley preached and connected with those in the factories, the mines, the tenement housing. Because of these “vile” practices, Wesley himself would eventually not be welcomed in the churches that he grew up in. I think he would have appreciated what we do here on Monday nights. We sing a bit, we read and reflect on scripture, we seek to take what we have heard proclaimed and apply it to our faith and to our daily lives. Faith does not need to be complex. We can try and make it that way. Jesus thought that faith should be pretty straight-forward too. When the lawyer was selected to ask Jesus which commandment was the greatest, Jesus answered with two. In Matthew 22, verses 37-40, here was Jesus’ response:

37 Jesus said to him, "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.



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For Jesus, faith was simple: love God and love neighbor. The fact that *"on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"* indicates Jesus' view of how simple faith could be. So, Wesley took his cue from Jesus. Keep it simple. Keep it direct. Keep it honest. Wesley also modeled his personal prayer life after Jesus' personal prayer life. Whenever we hear of Jesus praying in the New Testament, it is usually in an isolated and private place. In Luke 5, verses 15 and 16, we read, *"But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray"*. As life began to feel like it was closing in on Him, Jesus found solitude to pray. Wesley began his day at 4:30 and spent an hour in prayer. He found a solitary and quiet place to connect to God. Jesus also prayed in time of trial. After spending a long evening healing many people, in Luke 1 we read, *"In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed"*. Wesley too modeled this. When he had a particularly busy day ahead of him, he would get up an hour early to spend an extra hour in prayer. Beginning the day in quiet

prayer with God works for me too. Each day is begun with a cup of coffee in my living room or hotel room or quiet corner of a church during the mission trip or... It is just how I begin my day. This brings us to our next set of questions. Please spend a little time in honest conversation around your table with these questions:

- 1) When do you find time for personal prayer? How does this (or could this) draw you closer to God?
- 2) When are you most likely to go to God in earnest prayer? When are you most likely to skip your prayer time?



If you do not have a regular time of day when you pray, please find one. It does not have to be early in the morning. It can be whenever works for you. The time does not matter. What matters is that you have a regular time each day when you unplug from the world and plug into God. As Oswald Chambers said, "*Prayer is an effort of the will*". It can be. If you have a regular time of prayer each day, may the Lord our God ever bless your time together. If you do not, find a time so that the Lord can bless you too.



And now, the next ordinance: meditation on the Word. To me, this is very hard to do alone all the time. Yes, there are times when I read the Bible and spend some time thinking about what it is saying to me. But more often than not, I read the Bible in company. Sometimes it is early in the morning when I read the Upper

Room and consider its message. Sometimes it is just a few minutes later when I read through one of the lectionary readings for the week and ponder the accompanying devotional. My meditation on this Word of God comes forth through my pen as I write in my journal. I am physically alone but I am sharing the company and thoughts of others and am, in turn, sharing my thoughts with others who read my blog. Many Christians also spend time meditating on the Word in a small group. Yes, we do think about the Word here or on a Sunday morning, but it is different when you read and consider and wrestle with it with a small group of fellow believers.

Jesus did this all the time. If he was not healing someone, you could most often find Jesus reading and speaking on scripture or responding to a question that pertained to scripture. All of the questions that came from the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders had to do with the interpretation and/or application of scripture. When Jesus preached, it was always based on a passage found in the scriptures. And, again, Wesley practiced the study of or meditation upon the Word on a daily and regular basis. For example, in college, he joined with his brother and two other students each day to read and study the Word. Other students initially mocked them, calling them the "Holy Club". But as John and the others meditated on the Word, they were changed. As they studied the Word, they were led to go out and do what it said. They gave food and clothes to the poor. They visited those in prison. They cared for those who were hurting. And soon the witness spread at Oxford College and others joined their club.

If we fast-forward a few years, we see the heart of Wesley's Methodist movement was the "class" and the "band". John Wesley believed that living holy lives required believers to share their lives in intimate fellowship on a regular basis. "Classes" were groups of ten to twelve people who met weekly to discuss their faith. The class was led by a leader and they followed a prescribed set of questions each and every week. This practice, in fact, earned them the derogatory term "methodist" because they followed Wesley's set of questions so religiously. At each class meeting they talked about their struggles and the state of their souls. They prayed for and encouraged one another. It gave a place to both share one's struggles and to find accountability and support. Soon enough, everyone who wanted to be a Methodist was assigned to be a part of a class.

The "bands" were a bit more intense. They were always a homogenous group - by gender, age, or marital status. Bands were voluntary groups of people "who professed a clear Christian faith and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intention". Typical to the bands were ruthless honesty and frank openness. Both the class and the band changed many people's lives. As was the case at Oxford, the proof was in the pudding. Non-Methodists saw the change wrought in those who attended these small groups and again their numbers grew. The many small groups at our church and at churches throughout the world share some of these common characteristics, to one degree or another. People gather to study the Word, to grow in faith together, to help each other on their Christian journey, and to share in fellowship.

This leads us to our next set of questions. Please take a moment to discuss these questions about meditating on the Word:

1) How does the Word of God “speak” to you? Are there any ‘secrets’ you

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2) What benefits are there in small group study? Share any experiences that you have had in small groups.



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Three Simple Rules

“Stay in Love with God – Part 2”



And, lastly, this brings us to fasting. Just out of

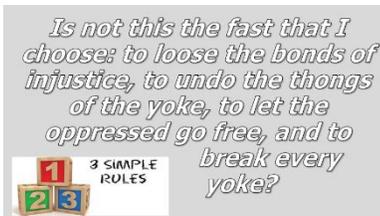
curiosity, how many of you have ever fasted? Fasting

was a practice that we can observe and study in the Old Testament. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks on behalf of God concerning false and true worship. In response to the people’s grumbling about God’s perceived absence, God responds with these words in Isaiah 58, verses 3 and 4:

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

God sees the fast that the people are practicing and sees that the fast is being done for the wrong reasons. Today, maybe I could fast to lose some weight. This would be a similar ‘wrong’ reason to fast. The fast or choosing to abstain from something must be done to draw one closer to God. In a traditional fast, one would abstain from food. The physical hunger one would feel would remind them of their own spiritual hunger for God. The time of physical hunger would

be spent in prayer – using that half hour or hour to pray to God from a place of need. This special time with God would develop not only our hunger for God but it would also develop the people’s passion for one another. Isaiah goes on to describe the results of fasting as God intends His people to fast. Please join me as we read verse six from Isaiah 58:



Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?



The fast should help produce the heart of God within us. In the New Testament, Jesus also fasted. Just prior to beginning His ministry Jesus went out into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days. It was a period of testing and preparation. We practice a similar fast when we give something up for Lent. We abstain from something and are reminded to turn to God every time we feel that craving or desire. Like the prophet Isaiah, Jesus also warned about fasting for the wrong reasons. In Matthew 6 Jesus addresses the “proper” way to give, to pray, and to fast. For Jesus, it was all about having the right heart when we give or pray or fast. Concerning fasting, this was Jesus’ warning from verses 16 through 18:

¹⁶ "And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Don't make a show of giving to the needy. Don't stand up and give loud and boastful prayers. Don't make a show of fasting. Make these practices about you and God. Make these practices about deepening your relationship with God.

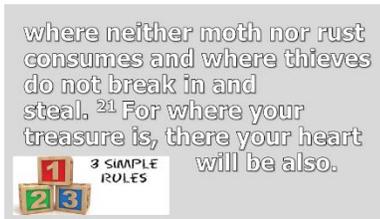
John Wesley was a regular practitioner of fasting. He practiced what he preached. Early on in his ministry Wesley fasted on Wednesdays and Fridays. Side note: Wesley would not ordain anyone who was not willing to commit to fasting regularly on these two days. But later in his life and ministry, Wesley focused on fasting on Fridays. He would begin his fast at sundown on Thursday and would fast until 3:00 pm on Friday. For Wesley, fasting was a time of prayer and connection with God.

Today, fasting seems to not be widely practiced. In a culture where discipline and self-denial are not the norms, this is not surprising. So why fast? Bill Bright, the man who founded Campus Crusade for Christ, says "fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God". If we search the scriptures, we find that David fasted several times, all as a means to humbly draw closer to God. In a time of trial, Esther fasted for three days, humbly seeking God's strength to go before the king on behalf of her people. Nehemiah fasted in grief over the walls of Jerusalem being torn down. God responded by giving him a vision of how to rebuild those walls. Bright went on to share his experience with fasting, stating, "fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal our true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life."

Just like the spiritual disciplines of meditation on the Word and personal prayer, fasting will also draw us closer to God and will deepen our relationship with God and with each other. In Matthew 6, Jesus speaks of the rewards we gain when we give and pray and fast with a right spirit within us. Please join me as we read verses 19 through 21 as we close:



19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.



When we invest in the things of God – public worship, hearing the Word proclaimed, holy communion, personal and corporate prayer, meditation on the Word, and fasting – we are not only being good Methodists and we are not only growing closer to God on this earthly journey, but we are also declaring that our heart belongs to God eternally as well. Let us pray...

Questions to Ponder in the Week Ahead:

- 1) Which practices – public worship, hearing the Word proclaimed, holy communion, personal and corporate prayer, meditation on the Word, and fasting – best build your faith?
- 2) How could you encourage others in one of these ordinances of God?