

**“Societies, Classes, Rules”**  
Luke 9:28-36; James 5:12-20  
August 31, 2008  
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I have a question for you. How is it with your soul?

Have you been asked that question lately? I'll admit, it's a little different than the standard questions we ask one another. You know, those questions like "How's it going?" "How are you?" or "How've you been?" Often, when we ask those questions, we're just being polite. Most times, they're just a simple way of greeting one another. And we usually answer something like, "I'm good, how are you?" "I'm okay." or "I'm fine, thanks."

Let's face it. These answers are not always the truth, but that's okay. You see, when we ask these questions, we often aren't expecting the truth. We don't necessarily want the truth because the truth might just be a long answer, and we don't have time for a long answer. We're just being polite.

But it's a little different when we ask, "How is it with your soul?" This question goes beyond simple pleasantries. There's more at stake. The answer might take some thought. The reply might take a while to listen to. You have to mean it when you ask a question like this. In our society today, we don't get asked about the state of our souls very much. I believe we don't ask that question enough.

So where do we find the opportunity to be asked a deep question like this by people who are truly concerned and who are interested in our answer? Our scripture texts this morning suggest that we might find what we're looking for in a small group.

You see, Jesus himself had a small group. Think of the disciples. Jesus gathered around him a small group of individuals to share life and ministry together. They cared for one another. They prayed for one another. And even within that small group of disciples, Jesus had an inner circle.

Our gospel text today speaks of one of the times Jesus spent with that inner circle of Peter, James and John. Jesus needed some time apart from the crowds, so he took his closest friends up on the mountainside to pray with him. Another time Jesus needed the support of his closest friends was in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had all his disciples with him, but he especially relied on Peter, James and John, asking them to stay awake and alert while he prayed. Yes, even Jesus himself relied upon the support of a small group of individuals.

After Christ's death, in the early days of the Christian movement, small groups continued to be important. Our text from the book of James this morning calls us to care for one another, to pray for one another, to confess our sins to one another, to watch out that our brothers and sisters in Christ do not stray from the life of discipleship we know they want

to have. In essence, we are to tend to one another, because we were not created to go it alone.

John Wesley called this, “watching over one another in love.” Wesley understood the importance of small group fellowship. He relied on it in his own life, and he built the Methodist movement around it. At the time, there were many small groups within the Church of England called “societies” where people met to encourage one another in their spiritual walk. And so while Wesley was at Oxford, he met with his brother Charles and two other men in a small group they called the “Holy Club.”

The ideals of the Holy Club, and the Wesleyan method of discipleship caught on. Many people came to John Wesley, asking him to spend time with them offering his advice and prayers. The numbers grew, and eventually they became a Methodist society. As Wesley moved around Great Britain, spreading the gospel and describing his method of discipleship, several societies began forming in different cities. According to our Book of Discipline, Wesley described these societies as a gathering of people “united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

Now remember, Wesley was not trying to start a new denomination. He was simply trying to help members of the Church of England live their faith in a more disciplined way. And so, in order to become a member of a society, you had to agree to some rules. They were called the “General Rules of Our United Societies” and they’re still listed in our Book of Discipline to this day.

Bishop Reuben Job recently wrote a book on these rules called “Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living.” Maybe you recognize the title. It’s the book I’m using for the Advent study I’m leading. So I’ll give you a little bit of information this morning about these three rules, but if you want more information, I invite you to join our class during Advent.

So here are the three simple rules:

1. Do no harm
2. Do good
3. Stay in love with God

Bishop Job wrote that, “It was these simple rules that transformed and gave new life to women and men of high and low estate, setting them on a path that would become a movement that formed a denomination and transformed a forming nation in North America.” He continued, “We will find quaint and dated some of the instructions spelling out how the rules may be practiced. But the three simple rules in themselves are contemporary and exceptionally well suited to our time, our culture, and our needs today.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The United Methodist Book of Discipline, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Reuben Job. “Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living” Nashville: Abingdon Press: 2007. P. 17.

So let's take them one by one. First, do no harm. Wesley expounds on this, saying we should avoid evil of every kind. And he gives a wide variety of specific examples of how to do no harm and avoid evil. Wesley encouraged his followers to avoid:

- Taking God's name in vain.
- Not keeping the Sabbath, either by doing ordinary work or by buying or selling.
- Drunkenness, buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them
- Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.
- Fighting, quarreling, brawling; returning evil for evil
- Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation like gossip;
- Doing to others what we would not want them to do unto us.
- Doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as:
  - The putting on of gold and costly apparel.
  - The singing those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God.
  - Softness and needless self-indulgence.
  - Laying up treasure upon earth.
  - Borrowing without a probability of paying; or taking up goods without a probability of paying for them.

Bishop Job reflects that "To do no harm means that I will be on guard so that all my actions and even my silence will not add injury to another of God's children or to any part of God's creation.<sup>3</sup> To do no harm is a proactive response to all that is evil – all that is damaging and destructive to humankind and God's good creation. To adopt this first simple rule as our own is a giant step toward transforming the world in which we live."<sup>4</sup>

The second rule is this: do good. Wesley explains further that we should as we have opportunity, do good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all people to their bodies, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping those that are sick or in prison and to our souls, by running with patience the race which is set before us, denying ourselves, and taking up our cross daily.

Bishop Job reflects that "Doing good, like doing no harm, is [again] a proactive way of living." He says, "I do not need to wait to be asked to do some good deed or provide some needed help. I do not need to wait until such circumstances cry out for aid to relieve suffering or correct some horrible injustice. I can decide that my way of living will come down on the side of doing good to all in every circumstance and in every way I can."<sup>5</sup>

Now these first two rules are important, but without the third rule, the first two become increasingly impossible. The third rule is to stay in love with God, and it is the foundation to all of life. Wesley put it this way: attend upon all the ordinances of God; such as:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. P. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. P. 38.

- 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.

Living in the presence of and in harmony with the living God who is made known in Jesus Christ and companions us in the Holy Spirit is to live life from the inside out.<sup>6</sup> If we are to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must find ways to stay in love with God.

Yes, these are simple rules. Do no harm, do good and stay in love with God. But do we practice them? When we rely on our own strength, we have a much lower chance of following them. When I know that nobody will really know or care whether I do something or not, I'm much less likely to live these simple rules. But when I'm in a small group where I know someone will be asking me questions like, "how is it with your soul?" I am much more likely to live the way I want to live.

How goes it with my soul? A big portion of that answer depends on how well I'm living the three simple rules. My soul is not able to rejoice when I know I've done harm or when I haven't done the good that I know I can. My soul is not well when I'm not tending to my love of God and to my relationship with God. But when I am doing no harm, doing good and staying in love with God, those are the times when my soul rejoices! Those are the times when I find peace in my life, when I'm fulfilled, when I'm most content with who I am. And I'm most likely to do this when I'm surrounded by people who will hold me accountable to my goals.

And Wesley understood this about human nature. As the number of people attracted to the Wesleyan way of living grew, as the societies grew, it got to the point where it was relatively unmanageable to maintain the kind of depth of relationship among people that Wesley knew was necessary. And so he organized people into what he called "classes" of ten or twelve people, gathering together in small groups to live a life of deeper discipleship. The class gatherings involved the sharing of religious experience through testimony, the sense of mutual responsibility between individuals, the acceptance of personal holiness as the aim of group participation, the insistence on freedom of opinion, and a group covenant.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of the classes, as Wesley saw it, was to implement an accountable discipleship among the society members.<sup>8</sup>

Accountable discipleship. That's one of the things that is missing in today's Methodist movement, and I believe, in Christianity in general. In my own experience, I am at my best when I have people holding me accountable for the life I want to live. When I have someone I know and trust watching over me in love, I am more likely to make the right choices.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 95.

So who is holding you accountable? Who do you have in your life who asks about the state of your soul? Maybe it's your spouse or your significant other. Maybe it's your family. Maybe it's a trusted friend or colleague. Maybe you have a small group. And maybe you don't have anyone holding you accountable to live the life you want to live.

The call to discipleship this morning is to find someone who can hold you accountable to the discipleship you want to live. It can be a great way to strengthen your marriage, your family relationships or your friendships. Our small groups are still open to receive new members, so maybe that's a place for you to start.

Friends, how is it with your soul? Accountability is the best way I know to ensure that we are doing no harm, doing good and staying in love with God, and through our living of these three simple rules, we may find the path that leads us to sing boldly, "It is well, it is well, with my soul!"