

Belong

If you have a choice to make, how do you decide what you should do?

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Become

The General Rules

John Wesley understood that when people first come to trust in Jesus they don't immediately transform into fully mature Christians. The hardest part isn't convincing people to accept the love of Jesus (justifying grace). The most challenging part is helping people live their love of Jesus with all they have and all they are (sanctifying grace). Wesley wanted rules, not because he wanted to be bossy, but because he believed that rules help provide a framework that allow us to grow in holiness and become more and more Christlike. In his ministry, Wesley witnessed that without rules even someone initially excited about the love of Jesus would eventually return to their old ways. The best way to know if someone is living a life committed to Jesus is to look at how they live and see the "fruit" in their life. John Wesley developed "The General Rules" to help Christians grow in grace and become deeply committed followers of Jesus.

“Wesley’s goal was not to get as many people as he could to pray a certain prayer. Rather, his goal was to get as many people as he could to trust in Christ, not just for one moment, but for the rest of their lives, and with all of their lives.” -Kevin M. Watson “A blueprint for Discipleship” p.37

Rule 1: Do no harm

If growing as a follower of Jesus means getting closer to God, we first need to stop doing things that move us away from God! For Wesley, “Do no harm” meant avoiding evil of every kind, even the stuff we might not think of as evil—gossiping or telling little white lies. These days, “Do no harm” could mean all of those things, along with things like not supporting businesses that use child labor or that harm the environment. No matter what we call evil today, the message is clear: we are called to be actively engaged in the world and pay attention to how our actions affect others.

Some of these harmful things are easy to spot.

What are easy to identify harmful things can you think of?

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Other harmful things are more difficult to discern.

Can you think of something harmful that might easily be overlooked?

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Wesley's Rule 1: Do No Harm

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

- The taking of the name of God in vain.
- The profaning the day of the Lord, either by doing ordinary work therein or by buying or selling.
- Drunkenness: buying or selling spirituous liquors, or drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity.
- Slaveholding; buying or selling slaves.
- Fighting, quarreling, brawling, brother going to law with brother; returning evil for evil, or railing for railing; the using many words in buying or selling.
- The buying or selling goods that have not paid the duty.
- The giving or taking things on usury— i.e., unlawful interest.
- Uncharitable or unprofitable conversation; particularly speaking evil of magistrates or of ministers.
- Doing to others as we would not they should do unto us.
- Doing what we know is not for the glory of God, as:
 - The putting on of gold and costly apparel.
 - The taking such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus.
 - 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.

Above is John Wesley's list from 1743. What do you notice? What questions do you have?

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Rule 2: Do good

Doing no harm is only the beginning. Wesley also wanted Methodists to seek out acts of justice and kindness. Actively striving to make a difference in the world helps Christians grow in faith. Wesley also believed that we should “do good” to ourselves by living simple and loving lives. Like “Do no harm,” doing good in the world is a big task. It means always looking for opportunities to care for others. As Methodists—and Christians—we are called to follow Jesus every single day by living an active faith. It isn’t enough to say the right words or believe the right things. We have to choose what’s good, even when it’s hard.

Wesley’s Rule 2: Do Good

By doing good; by being in every kind merciful after their power; as they have opportunity, doing good of every possible sort, and, as far as possible, to all men:

- To their bodies, of the ability which God giveth, by giving food to the hungry, by clothing the naked, by visiting or helping them that are sick or in prison.
- To their souls, by instructing, reproofing, or exhorting all we have any intercourse with; trampling under foot that enthusiastic doctrine that “we are not to do good unless our hearts be free to it.”
- By doing good, especially to them that are of the household of faith or groaning so to be; employing them preferably to others; buying one of another, helping each other in business, and so much the more because the world will love its own and them only.
- By all possible diligence and frugality, that the gospel be not blamed.
- By running with patience the race which is set before them, denying themselves, and taking up their cross daily; submitting to bear the reproach of Christ, to be as the filth and offscouring of the world; and looking that men should say all manner of evil of them falsely, for the Lord’s sake.

Above is John Wesley’s list from 1743. What do you notice? What questions do you have?

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Too often, the loudest Christians in our culture have become known for what they are against. What might be different if we were known by the “good” we are for? How might we do that?

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Rule 3: Stay in love with God

Or as Wesley put it, “attend upon the ordinances of God.” Wesley believed that participating in worship, reading the Bible, receiving communion, and praying were essential to holiness. You may recognize that these ordinances are also means of grace! You’re likely already doing some of this. Going to church, receiving communion, reading the Bible and praying, loving and serving others—these are all God’s ordinances. Another way to think about this is to live like you’re in love with God, or like God is your closest friend. As we learn more about God’s character, we become more and more attuned to injustice in the world. We become transformed by our relationship with God, which feeds everything else we do in our lives.

Wesley’s Rule 3: Stay in love with God

By attending upon all the ordinances of God; such are:

- 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.

John Wesley’s list from 1743

*“Do all the good you can,
by all the means you can,
in all the ways you can,
in all the places you can,
at all the times you can,
to all the people you can,
as long as ever you can.”*

-quote attributed to John Wesley

The General Rules are a practical way to help us keep the basics of a Wesleyan faith in mind. How do you think The General Rules might help you live your faith in Jesus?

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Our faith is not boring or irrelevant, but has something to say about the really important issues in our world. Faith isn't merely about believing the right things or saying the right words. It is about loving and serving others in practical, real life ways that share the good news of Jesus. Our faith calls us as the body of Christ to be the love of Christ in the world!

“The United Methodist Church believes God’s love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people’s lives to risk interpreting God’s love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out a faith perspective, not just responding to all the other ‘mind-makers-up’ that exist in our society.”-*The Book of Resolutions 2016*

Bless

What is one way you will put The General Rules into practice to bless others this week? . . .

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How were you blessed?

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Portions of this week’s lesson adapted from Sparkhouse Collaborate.