

Shiloh United Methodist Church
The Harmless Rule

Romans 13:8-14

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Romans 13:8-14 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁸ Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself.* ¹⁰ Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.

¹¹ As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. ¹² The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. ¹³ Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. ¹⁴ Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Alright let's admit something before we go any further. Paul really wants to go after inappropriate behavior here. This letter to the Romans is attributed to the apostle Paul, and if you read it at face value I think you might walk away with reading of this Christian walk is simple. Don't do these bad things and you will be clothed in Christ. When actually, I think Paul is suggesting, like Jesus did, that we need to follow a simple rule that will take most of our lives to live up to.

Now for Jesus, when he shared the golden rule, the rule many of us cherish. “The greatest commandment is to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.” We need to understand that he was doing this to help people out. From Moses there were 613 laws, plus some additional ones the Pharisees in Jesus day believed people should live by, and so they were struggling to follow all those laws on a daily basis. When they came across challenging questions of right and wrong, many people were dumbstruck by which laws they should follow.

Jesus offered an starting place for all those questions. Making the rest of the laws just a footnote. Additionally, I love what one of my favorite scholar says. You think they had a lot of laws to follow. There are more laws on the books that dictated how you had to drive to church this morning than even people in Jesus day had to follow.

As we take these first steps into learning how to paint by numbers, to learn practices that support our faith and can help us know where to start. We are going to start with the challenge of how do we seek to what is best for the world, the way God would hope us to proceed.

Let’s begin by hearing about our old pal John once more. John at this point in his life was back at college. He had done a good thing to go care for his dying father, he tried to be a preacher in a small church, but it just didn’t fit him. He found himself back teaching at Lincoln College at Oxford. There he was introduced to a “Holy Club” by his brother Charles. This was group of men seeking to live Godly lives through prayer, scripture study, and doing good for their community.

Quickly they called on John to be their leader. John was an overzealous leader and this would provide challenges for John at different points in his life. He believed method was most important, and so he had his friends meet 3 hours each day, pray every waking hour, and fast Wednesdays and Fridays. This club was not for the faint of heart. This method also caught the attention of others at the school who began to jeer the group, calling the Methodists.

The name never left the groups that John, John Wesley the founder of the Methodist movement, would lead.

During this time his group also began to do outreach to a local prison. Now this was a prison mostly for debtors. For people in the time of John Wesley were placed in prison when they had a debt they could no longer pay. It was not a good way, for once you were in, there was very little way to work off the debt. However, people in society would say, "Well that is just how the rules work." The friends became appalled at the conditions in the prison: No separation for men and women, poor facilities for health, and very little food. In addition to taking scripture, Methodists became known for bringing food, blankets and other needs for everyday people.

The Methodists also got noticed by the elite, who noticed the prisons were making the public upset and not really helping anyone. It was because of the Methodists bringing blankets along with Bibles that the powerful were moved to end the debtors prisons and it may be what saved England from not having the bloody revolutionary war that France experienced.

From this work of doing good John Wesley, later in life, developed general rules for his groups of Methodists. It is from

this that we get 3 primary rules in our Methodist doctrine that guide us to understand Jesus Golden rule, and our scripture for today. 1. Do No Harm 2. Do Good 3. Stay In Love With God You will notice that today we are focusing on Do No Harm, which is exactly what the 10 commandments are about in the Bible and exactly what the first part of loving our neighbor is about.

Here is the reality I love about Jesus, about Wesley, and about Paul. They list these things about loving neighbor, doing no harm, and all the things we should avoid to not harm our neighbor and just tell us to do it. However, it can be hard in the moment. Is doing no harm an active or a passive thing? Do we have to be the fictitious image of Buddhist monks and we cannot harm anything, so we go to great measures to avoid stepping on ants? Or is there some ways of understanding Jesus call on our lives, that can help us to do no harm?

First, I believe this rule is anything, but easy because truly doing no harm is not a passive thing. Jesus continually calls on his disciples and even himself to deeply and compassionately make connection with people. Jesus berates disciples for making separation, for turning away children, and encourages us to consider taking time away with God by ducking away to pray, as if to remind us we have to attempt to do no harm to ourselves before we can practice this rule with others. Compassion, placing yourself in someone else's shoes, and truly loving others is needed to grow into practicing this rule.

Let me share you a story about my friend Frank:
Frank has a son Justin and when Justin was in elementary school they got a beautiful Dog, a husky, named Misty. Misty was a running dog. Frank would take her to a wilderness trail in their

neighborhood for his runs 5 times a week, and even let her off leash to run and play.

14 years after getting Misty, Justin was away at college, Frank one day opened the car door to let Misty out, and Misty couldn't get out of the car. A vet visit revealed Misty had cancer and would not make it much longer. Justin, Frank's son, happened to be home from college the next week. So together they spent time with Misty, and scheduled a time for her to be put to sleep.

At the end of the week early in the morning, Justin has to back to school on a flight at 1pm, Frank decides for both of them he is going to take some of Misty's ashes up to that wilderness area they ran in everyday. Frank gets up early and heads to the park, but there is a problem. Frank's a little bit rushed, and the first parking lot he comes to is full, the reserve lot is full, and there is a traffic jam and another lot. In desperation Frank sees a parking spot in a cul-de-sac. He speeds over to it, there is a sign that says, "No parking 8pm-7am." It is 7:15am, so Frank is good. He gets out of the car and....

Out comes a man of middle eastern descent, a wood rake in one hand and a metal rake in the other. He is barreling down on Frank. Like a grizzly bear, "What are you doing you are parking right in front of my house?!"

Frank is one of the calmest men I know, he is a runner, wirey, and generally when you meet him you would imagine him to not think fights were were in his wheelhouse.

Man of compassion Frank is he said, "WHAT IS THE PROBLEM I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG?"

"This is my house, my street, my place."

"The sign says I can park here."

“You aren’t going to help me are you, when the hell with you, the hell with all of you.”

Turns and walks off.

This whole exchange probably takes 10 seconds. Frank’s heart is pounding. He is thinking, “What just happened here?”

Frank gets back in his car to think through this.

“Screw the guy, I am not doing anything wrong, I am busy, I am right. But if I drive away I am just caving in to another bully in my life, and he is ruining this moment when I want to mourn our dog.

I feel bad I lit off, so I want to move my car. But I want to do it with dignity. I’ll tell him I am going to move my car, just to prove it to myself that I can do this calmly.”

Frank goes up and knocks on the door, and the man opens it.

“What do you want?!”

Frank: “I just want to tell you I am going to move my car.”

“Well people are parking here all the time.” And the man keeps yelling for a minute.

Frank: “I just wanted to mourn my dog, I am sorry sir, I am going to move my car. I just wanted to mourn my dog.”

“We had a dog too.”

(In Frank’s head he is thinking, I am sure you did, but you just yelled at me and I AM IN A HURRY.)

Frank: “Yeah I am sure you did sir”

“We are not from here, we are from Iraq. We had a house. There were bombings all the time. One day there was a parked car in front of the house, it explodes. My daughter was playing not ten feet away an hour earlier. Now she can’t go to sleep, Dad we are in America make all those parked cars in front of our house go away.”

Frank says of this, “All of a sudden we are just two dads....all that fury was rooted in pain. My simple action, that was right caused him harm. Because he is just trying to protect his daughter in a suffering world.”

Doing no harm sometimes takes active compassion for God to play out the story, you have to name your needs for dignity and allow the other person/people to name theirs to do no harm.

The second thing about doing no harm is this rule can seem incredibly complicated to enact in the complex world in which we live. People can get compassion fatigue just thinking about it. My advice as a pastor, start small and God will carry the rest.

Let me give you an example. In 2012, the Hershey candy company announced they would be sourcing all their chocolate from only certified sources. This was a big announcement because many of the places our chocolate is grown is where child labor is allowed.

Part of the success of this announcement came from the hardwork of the United Methodist Women. Now we no longer have a small group identified as UMW here at Shiloh, but we used to. These groups of woman are in Methodist churches across the USA and the world. These women pray together, and study missions, and especially speak up when women and children are being exploited.

Through their prodding the Hershey candy company begin to pay attention to the problem that child labor was being used for much of their source product. Prodding that involved study and

then sharing their understanding with people they knew connected to the company.

At the same time UMW was doing their prodding, Wespeth the retirement and investment arm of the United Methodist Church was also engaged with other faith related ethical investors in encouraging companies like Hershey's to buy products from certified sources.

It was these two combined efforts that led to this announcement in 2012 of Hershey's shifting their practices. It was actively doing no harm that these two parts of our church engaged in, together without knowing it, because God directs us to do so.

An update to this, Hershey company still isn't all the way there according to a new report I just read. So, we all have more work to do, to make sure our chocolate isn't hurting people before we get to enjoy it.

<https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/news/hershey-s-fair-trade>

Last learning on this 1st simple rule, we have to start somewhere, and I believe we start by practicing this in community. It is in the safety of small community that we start this practice, this is why Wesley believed all people needed small groups to meet with and pray with. In small groups you can covenant to respectful rules that allow you to work out grievances and learn compassion.

In small groups you say, "Care about something on my behalf...I need to ask to help people understand harm that could be done to me and to understand how I can harm you." Frank did not start practicing compassion with random men screaming at him on the street, he has done it in small groups. The change in chocolate sourcing came from small groups of women saying, "This is not ok."

We are not talking about doing easy things here. Avoiding discomfort, is not what doing no harm is about. Discomfort is sometimes what is needed, to learn how to not cause further harm.

Friends I invite you to go this week, and do no harm.
It is not easy, but it is what God asks of us.
Shalom my friends.