

## Three Simple Rules “The Mark of a Methodist!”

Galatians 5:22-26

<sup>22</sup>By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup>And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup>If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup>Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

If you do not know Dr. John Francis, I'd like to introduce him to you this morning. We have many marvelous and experienced retired United Methodist pastors within our congregation and 'Dr. John' is one of them. John Francis has served many churches within the West Michigan Conference including Holland First, one of our largest. He has also served as District Superintendent of the Albion District and as the Conference Council Director. He now lives with his wife Donna at Clark Retirement Community, our United Methodist retirement facility here in Grand Rapids.

John, you've been a lifelong Methodist and you say you didn't have a choice! Tell us about your early years!

“My mother was a pastor, starting in 1933 and for the next 20 years. She was a strong influence. Six men entered the ministry from the church of my youth...”

Why do you think she had that impact?

I struggled in school and in my early theological education with what I'd been taught. But there was a certain kind of atmosphere of care in the church. Liturgically, they had two seasons: Revival in the fall and spring and Camp Meeting in the summer. Yet, the quality of relationships, of loving relationships, made an impression. My being Methodist is all about people.

Have your own reasons for remaining a Methodist changed?

There's always better reasons coming up! The reasons are always being remade. Our worldwide emphasis. Our balance between spiritual development and worldwide mission. That process still goes on.

At the heart of it, how would you characterize what a Methodist is?

Methodism has taught me how to experience God within myself and to use whatever gifts I have. The emphasis on love is central.

(Dr. Francis' answers are abbreviated here.  
See the website video for his complete replies.)

John, the church you grew up in is very different than the way First United Methodist Church is today. As you say, the church of your upbringing had two liturgical seasons – you had “Revival” season in the fall and spring, and “Camp Meeting” season in the summer. I don’t know if you had heard of Advent or Epiphany or Lent or Pentecost as “seasons of the church year.” You wrestled with the holiness tradition of which you were a part. Yet I heard you say something that is very much characteristic of the church of your early years and ours today. You said that what was significant to you was that, “There was a certain kind of atmosphere of care... The quality of relationships, loving relationships, made an impression.” And I think John Wesley singled out that very thing in describing the “mark” of a Methodist. It is love. Not love for God alone – the vertical dimension – but love of one another, the horizontal dimension, “watching over one another in love.” As you said, John: your being Methodist is all about people.

Before I go further, we should be aware of something very important. John Wesley’s goal was never to make us “Methodists.” He cared little for that idea. He sought to make us Christian. He desired for people to be faithful followers of Christ. Those who pursued this goal with him were ridiculed. His companions at Oxford were mocked as being “Bible moths” because the the light of God in the Bible attracted them as the light of a fire attracts a moth. And they were called “Methodists” because they were disciplined in following Christ’s way, studying scripture, visiting in hospitals and mental institutions, caring for the poor. Becoming like Christ mattered to them, and they did not care that they were called names. But they did not seek to become “Methodists,” they sought to become more Christ-like, more loving, more faithful. Being a “Methodist” was not an end in itself.

And so John Wesley could write of the identifying marks of a Methodist saying simple, “A Methodist is one who loves the Lord God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength. God is the joy of their heart, and the desire of their soul, which is continually crying, 'Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth whom I desire besides thee.' My God and my all! A Methodist is therefore happy in God; yes, always happy, as having in themselves a well of water springing up unto everlasting life, and over-flowing their soul with peace and joy.”<sup>[1]</sup>

And in a tract called *Advice to the People Called Methodist*, in a passage Bishop Rueben Job draws upon for our “3 Simple Rules” Lenten study, Wesley wrote, “If you walk by this rule (of love), continually endeavoring to know and love and resemble and obey the great God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as the God of love; if from this principle of loving, obedient

faith, you carefully abstain from all evil, and labor, as you have opportunity, to do good to all, friends or enemies; if, lastly, you unite together, to encourage and help each other in thus working out your salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love, you are they whom I mean by Methodists.”

In writing this, Wesley is attempting to get to the heart of what we are to be and do. There are so many ways found in the scriptures that we can experience the presence and power of God: by feeding the hungry, by encouraging and supporting children, by aiding the refugee, by studying, healing, helping, preaching, praying, teaching, worshiping, singing, visiting the sick, the poor, the prisoners, and the elderly. But behind these there is one aim, said Wesley: Aim for Love!

Wesley explained the importance of aiming at love to a Miss March who wrote to him in 1776. Remember that class distinctions were very rigid in the England of his day. Often the rich looked upon the poor as people despised by God. And Miss March was a well-to-do woman wrestling with what was right and proper to do. You see, her upper class prejudices led her to be hesitant about actually visiting the poor, instead of simply sending them food, clothes, or money. She wrote Wesley that she would much rather spend her time in improving her mind, of which Wesley generally approve. But he saw an opportunity for her to grow in grace in new ways. He advised Miss March to value improving her knowledge, but that is nothing compared to love. He writes to her rather forcefully:

“Aim at love and you will not stop at the threshold of perfection. There are many blessings in life, but how do you improve them to the glory of God? And are you willing to know (the most perfect way)? Then I will tell you how! Go and see the poor and such in their own poor little hovels. Take up your cross, woman! Remember the faith! Jesus went before you, and will go with you. Put off being a ‘gentlewoman.’ You bear a higher character – that of love!”

To John Wesley, then, the mark of a Methodist was simple to define, yet difficult to learn. Love. Just as Christ has loved you, so should we love. The Apostle Paul agreed, “Faith, hope and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.” So simple to say, so difficult to do. It’s as you said, brother John. Being a Methodist is about a quality of love which shows through our relationships. “A Methodist is one who loves the Lord God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength.” We are to carefully abstain from all evil, do whatever good we can, and then we are to “unite together, to encourage and help each other in

thus working out your salvation, and for that end watch over one another in love.” When we do this, said Wesley, “you are they whom I mean by Methodists.”

Dr. Robert Gorrell pastors our Church of the Servant in Oklahoma City. He writes: “I was serving in a church a few years ago and it came time for communion. I had noticed a very rough looking fellow in the congregation. He stood out from the others. I sort of wondered if he would come up during communion.

“When I gave the invitation, I noticed a man from our church that I will call Mark, a State Trooper, lean over and whisper to our ‘guest.’ Together they walked up the aisle. They knelt. I served each communion. Then I saw Mark take the fellow’s hand and begin to pray. Soon they were both in tears. They walked back to the pew with Mark’s arm over the man’s shoulder.

“I thought, ‘Of course it would be Mark.’ He’s the one that would minister to this guest in our church. Mark had seen the worst of times. A few years before, Mark and his family were returning from a high school football game when a drunk driver hit them. Mark, his wife, and both of their children were all seriously injured. His three-year-old daughter was permanently injured. At first, doctors thought she would never walk again. Eventually she made something of a recovery. She could walk, but barely. Her life would be a series of operations and doctor’s visits.

“Later in the week I was following up on our visitors and I called Mark and asked him if he knew anything about our ‘guest’ from Sunday. And then I learned something very interesting about Mark. When Mark’s family was so grievously injured Mark lost his faith. He kept it well hidden. None of us really noticed. We just assumed he was grieving. Mark was sure his daughter would die. He just couldn’t believe God let something like that happen.

But one morning at church something happened. While Mark was at the communion table a man he didn’t know knelt beside him. This faithful member of the church just whispered, “Don’t worry if you can’t believe right now. I am believing for you.” Just a few words. But it lifted the weight of the world off Mark’s shoulders. He realized he wasn’t in it alone – someone was watching over him in love, caring for him, praying for him, remembering him. He had the church to lean on. He realized God hadn’t been absent at all. God had just been speaking to him through the songs and sermons, through the prayers and good wishes of those around him.

Soon after that Mark decided. He knew what he had to do. He arranged to go to prison and meet the man who crashed into his family. Do you know

what he told the man? “Don’t worry if you can’t believe right now. I am believing for you.” And then he promised the man that on his first Sunday out, Mark would take him to his church. Mark promised the man, “You will have a place (that will love you) there.”

And so it happened. One Sunday morning a hardened ex-con with a long history of drug and alcohol abuse found himself at the communion table kneeling in prayer with a Texas State trooper. *Unbelievable?* Maybe in some places. But after all, the church is a place where love will triumph. And that’s how we will be known, if we are ever to be known at all. By our love. By our love of God reigning above all else in our hearts, and by watching over one another in love as we have been loved by God. May we pray?

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart,

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart.

In my heart, in my heart,

Lord, I want to be more loving in my heart, in my heart.

Amen.

[1] John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Section 10