

## Three Simple Rules: “Stay In Love With God!”

Colossians 2:6-10, 16-19, 3:12-15

<sup>6</sup>As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

<sup>8</sup>See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

<sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

<sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. <sup>17</sup>These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. <sup>18</sup>Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, <sup>19</sup>and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. (And in chapter Three...)

3:<sup>12</sup>As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup>Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup>Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup>And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

As you take your seats, we’re going to lower our screen to show you some brief excerpts of video interviews with some of the “sages” around here. The question put to them was “What has helped your faith stay strong?” which is closely related to the question of day, which is: “If we are to stay in love with God, how exactly do we do that? Why is it important for us to do that?” Most of the people in this video are members of First Church, but not all. We’re pretty inclusive here. But everyone interviewed is vitally connected to this church and has a great appreciation for who we are. Reynolds Price, the distinguished Duke professor and author, remembers his Father’s maiden aunt Belle, a Baptist, who used to chide her Episcopalian nieces saying that while their church was founded by Henry the 8<sup>th</sup>, her Baptist church was founded by no less than Jesus and named after his cousin, John. We’re Methodists, so we’re simply glad that God loves them both and that God’s grace can work in spite of such contentiousness. Listen closely now to what is said....

~ Video Presentation ~

While you digest those reflections, let me tell you about John Winter Smith. Way back in 2004, Time magazine reported that John Winter Smith was on a mission in life. His goal is to drink a caffeinated cup of coffee at every Starbucks in

the world. Oh, yes. And some of you have the nerve to say that I drink a lot of coffee. As of that time, Winter had been to 4,122 stores in North America, 114 in Britain, and 53 in Japan. The problem is, at the same time the company was opening an average of 10.2 new Starbucks a day.

The reaction from Starbucks to Winter's noble quest? Not much. They sent him Howard Schultz's book on starting this coffee empire and a few Starbucks mugs a while back. A spokeswoman simply calls the quest "flattering."

"There's no such thing as completeness," says Winter, who double-majored in philosophy and computer science at the University of Texas in Austin. "There's no way for me to be finished unless Starbucks goes out of business or changes its name... The best I can hope for is to keep up."

He sleeps in his car – when he can sleep, since he averages 10 cups of java a day. Some days the taste of coffee makes him sick. He is frequently jittery. Yet, "I can't foresee myself stopping," (says Winter). "It's too rewarding an experience."

Now: What do you think about that? I mean, he's going after what he wants and it makes him unique and he obviously gets something out of it, so more power to him. But, you have to wonder. Do you think that's why God put him in this world in the first place? Is that a goal worthy of a life? In a similar vein, though, I know a lot of people whose chief purpose in life seems to be to make themselves as comfortable as they can, or as secure as they can, before they die. Is that why God sent them into the world? Are those goals worthy of a life?

Which leads me to ask, what do you love most in life? What are you most passionate about? Why do you think God sent you into the world? What's important to you? What keeps you going? Security, power, money, sex? For a growing number of the world, pornography, sex, at least a debased version of it, makes the world go 'round. Pornography is now a 13.3 billion dollar business. In a sad commentary on human loneliness and compulsion, porn web sites draw 72 million visitors a month.

Our founder, John Wesley, had a much better, healthier idea. He believed that love could be what really matters. Love, for John Wesley, meant undivided devotion to God and abiding respect for people. "This love," said Wesley, "we believe to be the medicine of life, the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world, for all the miseries and vices of the human race. This religion we long to establish in the world – a religion of love and joy and peace."

It bears saying that Mr. Wesley was not naive in this emphasis on love. He lived in a world, and at a time, which was far more difficult and heartlessly cruel than ours and I don't need to weary you with those details. The harsh world you'll find a century later in the writings of Charles Dickens was nothing compared to the

England of Wesley's day. Wesley was no sentimentalist wearing rose-colored glasses. But he knew what faith in Christ is all about. And he knew the power of that faith – what it could do. And of greatest relevance here, he knew what was important in life and what was not. He knew what a life should be built around.

Now think back to what we heard in the video. “Daily bible study. Focus. Worshiping with one's church family. Expanding one's study. Patience. Serious prayer. Attentiveness to how God leads us. People who surround us in love. A lifelong relationship with the church. Remembering that God is always with us.” Such is the wisdom of some of our “sages” on what's important to them in keeping their faith alive, in keeping them in love with God.

Think back to what we heard written to the Colossians: “As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

I think back to when I was a child, visiting my grandparents in the mountains of New Mexico, and I found a beautiful shiny rock in a dry riverbed. It was black with bright chunks of gleaming yellow embedded in it. Gold! Treasure to a young boy. I was so enamored of that rock. I carried it around, showed it off, put it on my shelf to look at when I was alone. I even slept with it. I shared a room with my brother and didn't want him to steal it. It was my most precious treasure. And then one day it vanished. Agony! Gut-wrenching lose! But my parents explained that it wasn't really gold but iron pyrite. “Fool's gold.” Now, of course, I was just a child and given to childish ways. I thought like a child, I acted like a child. How could I know how childish I had been about my “treasure?” How could I know how ultimately foolish it was to treasure a stone? As we heard in Colossians these things that seem so important, food, new moons, festivals, stones, drinking Starbucks coffee, “are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” All these are being “puffed up without reason by a human way of thinking.”

Stay in love with God. Without love, nothing else matters. Stay in love with God. You can try and try to do no harm – and that's good. You can try and try to do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the people you can, at all the times you can, for as long as ever you can – and it's great to do good. But you can speak with the tongues of men and angels, and give your body to be burned, and if you don't love with the love which comes from God, what do you have in the end? As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in his love and established in the faith. Stay close to God. Stay in love with God.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav told the story of a poor Jew from Kracow, Eisik, son of Yekel. He was pious, but poor, and worried all the time about how he would

feed his family, pay the rent, raise a dowry for his daughters. He prayed and worried and prayed some more. Then one night he had a dream. An angel took him to a strange place. “This is Vienna. At this bridge by the palace you will find a treasure!” Eisik shrugged off the dream. But it came back again. And again a third time. So he went to Vienna, but as he was about to dig where he had dreamt, a soldier came up to demand what he was doing. These were not safe times for Jews in Vienna. Fearing he would be shot, Eisik could think of nothing to say but the truth so he told the soldier about the dream. To Eisik’s relief, the soldier burst out laughing. “You Jews are more stupid than I thought!” he said. “Suppose I had a dream that a great treasure was waiting for me in Kracow, under the stove of a Jew named Eisik, son of Yekel. You think I would run to Kracow to dig up your stove?” So, of course, Eisik returned home, dug under his stove and found the treasure he needed to pay his rent and feed his family and marry his daughters.

Said Rabbi Nahman, “The treasure is at home, but the knowledge of it is in Vienna.” What this means for us is that, in our search for what really matters, for spiritual treasure, we must often journey beyond ourselves, take risks, get help from others, even enemies. And often we will look for the treasure in all the wrong places and things. We’ll chase after it coffee shop after coffee shop, stone after stone. Yet, inevitably we return home to find the treasure has been within us all along.

And that treasure, ultimately, is our capacity to love. And it is kindled when we experience God’s love and our hearts, in gratitude, love God in return.

It’s the source of all of our capacity to love and to live life fully. Rekindle the gift of God that is within you. You have the grace, you have the treasure, you have the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit. And you will find it, if you stay in love with God.

Grant us, Lord, your spirit that we might remain in love with you. And in loving you, may we have the discernment and wisdom to know how not to do harm. And in loving you, may we find the power you can give us to do good to all people whenever we can. And in loving you, may we find that we have found the greatest treasure of all, the real and lasting treasure, that will bring us at last to you. In the power and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.