

"THE GREAT LIFE (#3): STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD"

(Colossians 2:6-7)

© 2023 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[PROP NEEDED: *Upper Room* devotional booklet]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 8-20-23]

--I--

1. [11am ONLY... Read Text (NRSV): Colossians 2:6-7 and Pray.]
2. For the last two weeks we've been sharing in a series in which we've been discussing three principles of action that can help us live The Great Life with God and others.

A--These were first taught by Jesus in what we today call his "*Great Commandment*." ¹

B--Yet, the founder of Methodism (John Wesley) took these two principles and unpacked them as three "General Rules"--"steps"-- for Christians to follow to experience that great life with God: ²

1--The first two help us to "love our neighbor": (#1) "*Do No Harm*"; and (#2) "*Do Good*"

2--But the third principle is what we'll be focusing on today: **STAY IN LOVE WITH GOD**

3. And even though this is the *last* of Wesley's "General Rules", it's not because its *least* important -- after all, Jesus mentions this as the *first* of His "Great Commandments," didn't he?

A--No. The reason Wesley started with two ways to "love our neighbor" is because it's the "low hanging fruit" of being a Christian, so to speak.

1-- E.G., compared to this last one, "*Doing no harm / Doing Good*" are relatively easy to achieve;

2--You don't have to be particularly religious or spiritual to do them... *anyone* can!

B--But this *last* one requires something *more*: ..a willingness to do whatever it takes first to *get* -- and then to *stay* -- connected to God. ³

C--Actually, that's the whole point of today's short scripture from Colossians 2:6-7 (NRSV):

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

D--HOW, though, do we actually do that? How do we "*continue... rooted and built up*" in Christ?

In other words, **what are some ways for us to "Stay in Love with God"?**

--II--

4. I want to answer that by inviting us to think about some parallels with the human body -- specifically, what are the *necessities* that the human body requires in order to *have* and *sustain* life?

A--Now, you medical-folks can add to this list, but the way I see it, there are at least three necessities: #1) *Breath*; #2) *Nourishment* (e.g., food /water); and #3) *Companionship*.

B--And if we as Christians understand that *physical* things often have *spiritual* counterparts (meaning that if something is true for the *body*, it's probably also true for the *soul*), then if our *physical* bodies need breath, nourishment, and relationship, then our *spiritual* bodies likewise need the spiritual equivalent of those three, as well.

1--Today we sometimes call these things "*Means of Grace*," or "*Spiritual Disciplines*" (250 years ago, John Wesley called them "*ordinances of God*").

2--But by whatever name, they are nothing more than actions which -- when practiced consistently in our lives -- help us connect to, and stay in love with, God.

C--So let's think, then, about what some of these *spiritual* parallels are.

5. First, our need for **physical breath** I think reminds us of the importance of **PRAYER** -- in fact, prayer has often been called the "*breath of our spiritual lives*."

A--Let's try something: close your eyes and take 3 deep breaths in and out as I direct us... [**Direct three deep breaths for all...**] How did that feel? Good? Why?... because we were breathing out harmful carbon dioxide and breathing in life-giving oxygen.

B--Well think about it: prayer does the same thing -- it enables us to breath out ("confess" our sin and shortcomings) and to breath in the presence of God through His Holy Spirit.

C--And when we begin to think of prayer like this -- as spiritual "breath" -- then it changes the way we understand and practice it. It's no longer just a way to "get" something from God, or to change God's mind about something, but instead is a way to receive God *Himself*.⁴

1--And that's why prayer is not so much about changing *GOD* as it is about changing *US* -- in the words of 17th-cent. monk Brother Lawrence, prayer is simply "*practicing the presence of God*."⁵

2--In fact, Jesus gave us a model to use for *what* and *how* to pray -- something we call "The Lord's Prayer,"⁶ which was *not* intended to be merely words said by rote each week in worship, but a skeleton/structure upon which to build our own, more complete, prayer.

D--So, what's your prayer life like? How often and how deeply do you pray? It's our spiritual breath, so we need to be consistent and regular with it.

6. The second thing humans need for survival is **physical nourishment** (food and water). And I think the spiritual parallel for this is our need to regularly read and study **THE HOLY SCRIPTURES** (the Bible) -- which we often call the "*bread of life*."

A--As humans, how often do we eat & drink? (3x day) What would happen if we only ate/drank *once/week*? (we'd starve)⁷ In the same way, we need *daily* reading of God's word to stay spiritually healthy.

B--In doing this, you see, we not only learn *about* God and how God acts & interacts with humanity, but as we read, we're transformed *by* God.

1--If you've ever taken a "Disciple" or other small group Bible Study class, you know what I mean, because it was probably a *transformative* experience.

2--(Talk about my own transformative experience with "Disciple" = with a group of preachers from several churches in Carrollton, GA...) -- next month we'll begin a new round of "Disciple" Bible Study classes; I hope you're signed up for one if you haven't already.

C--Of course, there are a variety of different tools to help us develop better Bible reading habits, but the one I always start with is the Upper Room Daily Devotional [**SHOW PAPER COPY...**]

1--You can get paper copies every 2 months here at church, read it online as a daily email, ⁸ ...

2--...Or even read it on your smart phone or tablet like I do using the UpperRoom app, and it gives me something daily to read from God's word.

3--And there are lots of other resources if you want to go deeper, but if you're not currently doing daily Bible reading, then this is a good place to start.

D--Now, it's true that we may not always *understand* everything we read in the Bible, but that's where the third spiritual tool comes in to play...

7. ...Our human need for ***companionship and relationship*** reminds us (thirdly) of our need for **CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, WORSHIP and the SACRAMENTS.**

A--Think about it: the interactions we experience with others in our *church* function much like those in a biological *family* ⁹-- it's why the church is often called the "*Fellowship/Family of God.*"

B--And the same purposes for our *physical* family (e.g., support, nurture & growth) apply to the church as the family of *God*, as well -- which is you'll constantly hear me say that every Christian needs to be active in a small group ...so we can be supported, nurtured and have a place to grow! ¹⁰

C--And just as human companionship in our families enable us not only to *survive* but also to *thrive* by reminding us that we're part of something bigger than ourselves, so participation in *Christian WORSHIP* and the *SACRAMENTS* do the same.

1--When we participate either in person or online in corporate worship, and experience the Sacraments (Holy Communion or Baptism), our focus is *not* on *each other*, or on the type of music, the quality or style of preaching, or even on the *method* of serving Communion,...

2--...but on the God who is "bigger" than *any* of us -- the God who knows our pains, hurts, and cares, and is bigger than all of those things!

3--Our regular participation in Christian Fellowship, Worship & the Sacraments, you see, remind us that God is in charge no matter what -- even when the rains, floods or "wildfires" of life come; that He alone can give comfort, peace and hope when we face situations that threaten to overwhelm, "flood", or "burn through" our lives.

--III--

8. Now, just as we could add more things to the list of "necessities" for our *physical* bodies, so we could also add more things to this list of ways that we can "*Stay In Love With God.*"¹¹

A--But the ones we've mentioned today are the basic ones, and have been for 2000 years: **Prayer; Scripture Reading/Study; Christian Fellowship;** and participation in **Worship** and the **Sacraments** -- each of these are *tools*; not "ends" in themselves, but "means" to the "end" of connecting with God.

B--So my question for us today is... How *well* -- and how *regularly* -- are you practicing *each* of them?

C--The extent and depth of our answer and practice will determine the extent to which we'll be able to "Love God" with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and this eventually also affects our ability to "Love our Neighbor" as ourself.

9. So... ***Do No Harm; Do Good; Stay in Love with God*** -- these are the ways we can fulfill the challenge of Jesus' "Great Commandment" to love God and love our neighbor.

A--It's true that effective *practice* of these is not always easy, but they nevertheless are ways that God's Spirit makes possible for *ALL* of us at least to try!¹²

B--So, will you dare to take on these three practices -- if you're not already -- in order to live The Great Life with God and others? My hope and prayer is that we'll all be willing to do just that!

10. [PRAYER: "*Lord Jesus, we confess to you that all too often we try to 'love our neighbor' by 'doing no harm' and 'doing good' all by ourselves, in our own human strength, and find ourselves empty and tired. Help us instead realize that without our daily connection to you as the source of life and love, we can never hope to change or transform the world around us. Help us to discipline our souls and ourselves to intentionally and regularly practice ways to stay in love with you -- to pray, read and study your Holy Scriptures, to fellowship with other believers, and to worship you weekly. Through these, open our eyes, mind, and heart to discover your presence, so that we may experience the great life that you desire each of us to have. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ Found in Matthew 22:37-39 and Luke 10:27.

² He referred to them as the "*General Rules*" of Methodism, and all the early Methodists of 18th-century England were held strictly accountable to the keeping of them.

³ In fact, Bishop Reuben Job says that "*While the first two rules are essential, the truth is, we cannot fix on our own much of what ails us.... Only living in the... presence of GOD will bring the redemption, healing, transformation, and guidance that is so desperately needed.*" He's really saying that it's our doing of this *third* step that makes the first two steps even possible [Reuben P. Job, Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 48-49]. Job also says that "*The first two rules are important and bring immediate results; but without the third rule, the first two become increasingly impossible*" (Job, Three Simple Rules, p. 48).

⁴ Do me a favor: Take a deep breath in... now out... & in... & out... How do you feel? Better? You see, just as *physical* breath helps us take in the life-giving element of oxygen and exhale the harmful element of carbon dioxide, so *prayer* helps us take in the life-giving Spirit of God, and to confess and get rid of the stress and brokenness of our souls and spirits. When we breathe, we *breathe in* air that contains life-giving oxygen, nitrogen, and a number of other elements that are necessary for our bodies to function. And when we cease breathing, we cease living, right? So, more than almost anything else, physical life requires breath/breathing! Prayer is similar in that it is more about *taking IN* God and getting rid of evil in our souls than about *getting* something *FROM* God.

⁵ Brother Lawrence, The Practice of the Presence of God (written between 1640-1700; public domain).

⁶ Read Matthew 6:9-13.

⁷ Our bodies also need *nourishment* (food and water) in order to survive. We don't have to eat or drink *as often* as we have to breath, but its still vitally important that we do because nourishment provides energy. And without energy, our bodies grow weak, our muscles begin to decay and atrophy, eventually causing our organs to cease, and we die.

⁸ Read each day's devotion online at <https://www.upperroom.org/devotionals>, or sign up to receive it as a daily email at <https://www.upperroom.org/welcome>.

⁹ Now, we might not think of *companionship* as a necessity, but talk to POWs or anyone who's been isolated from others for a long time & they'll describe it as a *real* necessity! You see, we humans are social creatures -- created to live *not* in isolation, but in community, in healthy relationship with others; that's why we live in *families*. In fact, science now confirms the fact that humans who live in isolation for too long develop in unhealthy ways (For example, consider the 1991 case of Jaycee Dugard, a California woman isolated by her kidnapper for 18 years in a backyard tent, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kidnapping_of_Jaycee_Dugard). But more than needing companionship just to *survive*, we also need it in order to *thrive* -- to remind us that (in the words of poet John Donne), "*no [one] is an island*," and that we are all part of something that's *bigger* than ourselves.

¹⁰ It's in these small groups like Sunday School, Bible Study, a music or sports group, men's or women's ministry group, etc. that these functions of care and challenge are experienced.

¹¹ Other possible examples of things we can do to help us "stay in love with God" might include things like Fasting, Journaling, Reflective Silence, listening to Christian music, reading Christian literature and authors, financial giving, etc.

¹² "*We practice the rules, but God sends the power that enables us to keep them. We practice the rules; but God does the transforming, the renewing, and the building of the house... of our lives, of our church, and of our world*" (Reuben Job, Three Simple Rules, p. 48).