

Text: [James 3:13-4:3 \(CEB\)](#)

Date: May 5, 2024

Title: "Do Good"

Theme: Jesus way is to do good that seeks the other's good – not our own.

1

Last week, my friend Jess preached for me and she spoke about what it means to "Do No Harm"

Particularly when it comes to our words

I thought it was a *great* sermon, and I have been thinking about it all week

So Jess, thank you!

Do no harm is the first of what Methodists call the Three General Rules – rules created by John Wesley and his friends to help guide them as they grew in faithfulness and holiness

Doing no harm is important – vitally important

That's why we celebrate the removal of language from the *Book of Discipline* that has served to keep the doors closed to so many for so long

Because we were doing people real harm – spiritual, emotional, and even physical harm by creating an environment where misperception, prejudice, even hate was allowed to flourish¹

And the Church has, for far too long, been complicit in that

But doing no harm – it's not quite enough, is it?

Because, isn't the quickest way to do no harm just to go off and live by yourself?

It's a lot harder to hurt people when you don't interact with them

And in the early centuries of Christianity, there were monks – the so-called Desert Fathers – who did exactly that

But Wesley didn't buy that genuine Christianity could be lived out in just avoiding people in order to avoid harm
In a preface to an early collection of hymns, he talked about the Desert Fathers, saying the whole idea made no sense – because Christ's people are meant for community:

“‘Holy solitaires’,” he wrote, “is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers.”²

He didn't mince words, right? And then he offered this famous line:

“The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.”

2

Doing no harm is good, but it's not good enough
Because we are called to live in community
And when we are living together, it's not just about avoiding harm to others

For community to work, we need to look out for each other
I mean, *actively* look out
If I see someone upset and crying on the edge of the room
I can't just say, “Well, I didn't cause that. That doesn't concern me.”

Doing no harm doesn't go far enough
Because it doesn't cause me to walk across the room to
figure out why this person is hurting
And that's why Wesley's second General Rule was this:
DO GOOD.

3

To do good is to embrace the wisdom that comes from
God
That's the argument from the book of James

Now, we live in a world where people mostly look out for
themselves, would you agree?
I am continually amazed by the level of self-dealing I see
Folks always seem to be working some kind of angle
To the point where it's easy to lose faith in people

But let's be honest here
In most situations, isn't OUR first question:
What's in it for me?
We might not SAY that
But before we invest our time, effort, energy, or money,
don't we ALL usually do that kind of a calculus?
If I do you a favor, am I not tucking the memory of that
favor somewhere deep down, so I feel like I can call
on it later when I need something?

It's hard to be selfless
Because our selves are often so big and take up so much
space in our minds

But James says that when we're genuinely doing good,
when we're aligned with God's wisdom, that there will
be a humility about us
A simplicity about us

No bragging
No jealousy born of ambition
No desire to use the good we do to win anyone's favor
Only the desire to see that it benefits someone else

Doing good
For the sake of people THINKING you're good
Does no good
I'll say it again: doing good for the sake of people thinking
you're good does no good
That's what James calls wisdom "from the earth" –
"natural" and even yikes! – "demonic!"

Contrast that with "the wisdom from above" which is "pure,
peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good
actions, fair, and genuine"
What matters to God is not just THAT we do good
But WHY we do good

There's wisdom from the earth
And there's a wisdom from above
And there is a difference between the two

4

I'm sure that when a lot of people drive by this corner
They see rainbow flags
They see "All Are Welcome" here
Folks make assumptions about who we are, and why we
do what we do
That we don't believe in the Bible
That we don't believe in Jesus

Here's what I'd want to say:
What I observe, when I read the Gospels, more than
anything else
Is that what Jesus taught, what Jesus did
Was all about love
In him was everything that James describes:
"wisdom that is pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with
mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine"

That love was completely unlike anything this world has
ever seen before
Or since
Because somehow that love led him to find a way to do
good:

To fishermen and Pharisees
Children and centurions
Prostitutes and tax collectors
Jews and Romans alike

He did good to people who believed in his God
And people who didn't
People who liked him
And people who wanted to see him on a cross

Somehow he managed that
He managed to work for the good of all of them
Even those who betrayed and persecuted him

5

In my mind, THIS is what it means to do good
It's not about an agenda
It's not about scoring points with anyone
(Including God!)

Instead, it's about living into a love
That changes everything
Because we know it already HAS changed everything

And it's about living into a love
That blesses everyone
Because Jesus chose to bless ALL and not just some

When we live into and out of this love
We can't help but do good
Because that is the Jesus way

See, this is what makes following him simultaneously so
beautiful
And so difficult

Remember the first week of this series I said that faith is about doing what Jesus did?
It would seem that a sermon about “Doing Good” would be a repeat of the same, wouldn’t it?

But no, we need to take that a step further
Because it’s not just about doing the things Jesus did
It’s about doing them in the way - and for the reasons -
Jesus did them

Jesus’ love is an unselfish one
That doesn’t look to its own interests
But to the interests of others – that’s how Paul puts it
(Philippians 2:4)

And usually we think about Paul and James as being in
opposition
Faith *versus* works
But here they intersect

When we do good looking to the interests of others and
not our own
THAT’S the wisdom that comes from above – not below
“wisdom that is pure, peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with
mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine”

It's not enough that we do good
We need to do good in a way that seeks the other's good
And not our own

That's the Jesus way

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¹ For example, while most studies show that religion has a protective effect against suicide in teens, it has the opposite effect for LGBTQ+ teens. See: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/research-briefs/religiosity-and-suicidality-among-lgbtq-youth/>

² John Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (1739), Preface, page viii.