

*Sermon: The General Rules: Do No Harm*  
*Text: Galatians 5:16 – 25*  
*Date: June 7, 2009 AM*  
*Place: Jesup First UMC*

I'm not really a "fruit man." Now, I like fruit every once in a while, but Lori loves fruit. So, I went to the store one day and I couldn't believe all the fruit they had. Do you remember when you had to wait for fruit to be "in season" to find it in the grocery store? In this world of global trade agreements and artificially produced foods, it doesn't matter if it's "in season or not, you can almost find anything you want, any time you want it. Now, when I was a kid, the closest we ever came to that was fruit cocktail. Fruit cocktail had grapes and pears and peaches and cherries, and lots of my favorite fruit ... sugar ... all in one little can.

Now, in our text, Paul talks about a different kind of fruit, the Fruit of the Spirit. He says, "*But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, He will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*" These godly characteristics are produced in us by the Holy Spirit. Now, usually a tree produces one kind of fruit, but when we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, our life produces all kinds of fruit; it's kinda like fruit cocktail.

Now, what's that got to do with Methodism? Well, as faithful Christians in the Wesleyan-Armenian tradition, we have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit; our hearts have been strangely warmed. So, John Wesley said we could expect to see a certain kind of fruit in the lives of the Methodist people.

This morning, I want to look at the fruit-filled life in terms of what John Wesley called *The General Rules*.

Listen to what he wrote in his journal: *“In the latter end of 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convicted of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come ... there is only one condition previously required of those who desire admission into these Societies: a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins, but wherever this is really fixed in the soul, it will be shown by its fruits. It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation”* by following these General Rules.

Now, these General Rules are just another way of discussing the Fruit of the Spirit, because they sum up what it really means to live a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led life. This is how Spirit-filled people live out their faith within the church and within the world. Now, there are three General Rules, but we’re only going to look at the first one this morning ... **Do No Harm!** John Wesley wrote: *“It is therefore expected of all who continue therein, that they should continue to evidence their desire for salvation, first, by doing no harm, by avoiding evil in every kind, especially that which is most generally practiced.”* And then, he listed several things that we should avoid, like: taking God’s name in vain, drunkenness, fighting and quarreling and things like that. Anything that harms others and draws them away from God should be avoided at all costs.

What a different world we would live in if we could simply reconnect with these General Rules; for

you see, Wesley's Rules are really God's Rules. He took them right out of the Bible. Do no harm! Let's think of some of the ways we harm others.

***First, we harm people with our tongues!*** James 3 says: "*The tongue is a fire ... set ablaze by hell itself.*" And he says we use our tongues to praise God and turn around and use it to curse our neighbor.

***Now, one of the ways we harm with our tongues is gossip.*** Some pastors decided to get together to love one another and hold one another accountable. So they met for coffee and as they talked, one pastor said: "*Brothers, I believe confession is good for the soul. So, I must admit that I really love going to movies.*" One said: "*Well, I must admit that I sneak away to smoke now and then.*" A third said: "*Brothers, I have a problem with gambling; I play the lottery now and then.*" And then, they all looked at the fourth pastor who sat there smiling. They said: "*What about you, brother?*" He said: "*Me? Oh, I'm just a gossip and I'm dying to get out of here.*"

Proverbs 16:28 says: "*A man of twisted purposes is a cause of fighting everywhere; and he who says evil secretly makes trouble between friends.*" Paul wrote to the church at Corinth; he said: "*For I fear, lest by any means, when I come, I should find you not such as I would, and should myself be found of you such as you would not; lest by any means there should be strife, jealousy, wraths, factions, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, or tumults.*"

Gossip harms people and gossip ruins the unity of the church! It's a cancer in the Body of Christ. But

instead of getting it surgically removed by the work of the Holy Spirit, we excuse it. Haven't you heard someone say: "*Now, I ain't saying anything behind her back that I wouldn't say to her face*"? But it still hurts. Gossip harms others.

***Another way we harm with our tongues is by criticizing!*** One day two taxidermists stopped at a storefront window to look at an owl. And they began to criticize the way it was mounted. Its eyes weren't natural; its wings weren't in proper proportion; its feathers weren't neat enough; and its feet need a little work. And when they were finished working the bird over, it spread its wings and flew across the store.

Oh friends, there's so much criticism in the world. It has become our national past-time. The old saying is: "*Those who can do and those who can't criticize.*" And it's not just out there in the world; it's right here in the church. I wonder what would happen if we all stopped being "Monday-morning quarterbacks" and just started working together, side by side. Because friends, I can assure you the Crown of Life is for faithful service not faithful criticism.

Criticism hurts. Criticism harms others.

***But we also harm people with our actions!*** I Peter 1 says: "*Be holy in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'*" Sometimes the things we do causes harm to others. James 4 and 5 talks about rich Christians who are oppressing poor Christians, but most of the time we harm others by what we leave undone.

Now, Jesus told a story about a man who was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho and fell among some robbers who beat him, robbed him, and left him for dead. Three people passed by the man that day – a Priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. Two of the men kept going; only one man – the Samaritan – stopped to help. Two men ignored the needs of their neighbor and they caused as much harm to him as the ones who beat him and left him for dead.

You know, in our age of busyness, it's so easy to simply pass right on by, to turn our heads and walk the other way so that we don't have to get our hands messy, so that we don't have to spend any of our valuable time or money on somebody else's problems. So it's easier to just leave them lying in the ditches of life, bruised, bloodied, and hurting. And when we do, we cause a lot of harm.

We do harm by what we do to others and by what we leave undone!

Do no harm! It is required of those who desire to continue in the Methodist gatherings, that we should evidence our desire for salvation by doing no harm! And when we do no harm, we are indeed living by the very Spirit of God, so that our lives bear fruit for His Kingdom. And when your life bears fruit and my life bears fruit, and our lives bear fruit together, it'll be better than any can of fruit cocktail you've ever seen in your life.

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**