

Three Simple Rules: Stay in Love with God
Deuteronomy 6:4-9
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Today is the third and final installment in our Three Simple Rules series. The first two rules are do no harm and do good. The third rule is stay in love with God. What does it mean to be in love with God? From a guy's perspective this is probably not the best language to encourage men to be in a relationship with God. Guys understand language like believing in God, or respecting God, or faith in God. But being in love with God? That sounds a bit too mushy for most guys. Maybe this is one reason churches have more women than men. Let's see. How could we talk about staying in love with God in a way that would speak to men and women?

When we talk about God it often helps to make a connection with how God acts with our experience as a human beings. In order for us to understand what it means for us to stay in love with God I thought that it might be helpful to look at human relationships. On our kitchen bulletin board there is a yellowed strip of newspaper with an article about ways to improve your marriage. What I want to do is to look at these eight relationship strengtheners in terms of our relationship with God.

First is listen. The article reads, "How do you feel when you know you are not being listened to? Listening while you watch television is not listening. Listening with your eyes and heart is listening." Part of what John Wesley means when he admonishes us to stay in love with God is simply to listen to God. Do you have such moments when you can give your whole attention to God? Can you eliminate the distractions so you can really listen to the still, small voice of God? Contrary to popular belief prayer is practiced best when we do more listening than talking to God.

Second is apologize. Wow! Apologize to God! What have you done that needs a God-apology? I wonder. Do people apologize anymore? I don't hear many good apologies anymore. We have found ways to skirt the issue. For example, it has become popular to use a substitute for "I'm sorry." Now many say, "My bad". The *Urban Dictionary* defines my bad as "A way of admitting a mistake, and apologizing for that mistake, without actually apologizing. Paraphrased, "I did something bad, and I recognize that I did something bad, but there is nothing that can be done for it now, and there is technically no reason to apologize for that error, so let's just assume that I won't do it again, get over it, and move on with our lives." ... A flippant apology.

I can tell you that God isn't interested in such glib attempts at apologies. God wants us to own up to our actions, our mistakes, our sins. Only then can we truly experience the cleansing of real forgiveness.

Third is appreciate. My guess is that we all appreciate God. It's one of the reasons we gather for worship each Sunday. Appreciation or praise is included in all of our hymns and prayers. The question for us to consider is, "Do you think God wants to be appreciated?" The answer is yes. Natural and human creation contribute to God's feeling of fulfillment. God is Creator. Those with creative gifts have a need to share them with others and to be appreciated. So you and I need to appreciate God.

Fourth is anticipate. The article reads, "It's a human need to have something to look forward to. When you look forward together, you draw closer as a couple." People generally believe that God exists. What they don't agree on is the nature of our relationship with God. Let's face it. Many people don't believe that being with God is very exciting. Why is that? I'm not sure God really cares to be an exciting God to us. What we learn from scripture is that God loves us and is faithful to us. Faithfulness is probably not in the top ten list of most exciting qualities in any relationship. But I'll take faithfulness in marriage and in my relationship with God over excitement any day.

The fifth way to stay in love with God is to compliment God. The article text reads, "Go beyond looks with "I really like the way you handled that situation." "You are such a good dad." I'm not sure God has any physical look even though humans seem to need God to have one. Our culture is too hung up with physical looks. We are bombarded by the media with messages that we don't look good enough and therefore need this product or that outfit. If you want to know what a society values look at what they compliment. It is a rule of human behavior that people will work hard in the areas where they are complimented. As a teacher and pastor I have tried to make it my practice not to lavish compliments on the physical appearance of others. Rather I try to find something inside, something in their character to compliment. I would prefer they work harder on their character than their hair.

When it comes to giving God compliments you and I need to get to know God's character. Scripture tells us that God delights in receiving the praise of God's children.

Now the sixth suggestion may be interesting to connect with God. Touch, hold, caress. How does one touch, hold, or caress God? We often speak about the touch of God, or that God holds us close. But how do we envision us touching or holding God? The best example I can think of is holy communion. This practice is a sacrament in the church. That means that we don't do it flippantly. We tell a very important story each time we receive it, recounting God's activity in the lives of the saints. All are invited to the table because God's love is for all.

Then we come forward with open, empty hands. We receive the body of Christ. We reach out and touch God. That bread becomes saturated in the cup and we take it into our bodies. In this sacrament God becomes tangible and real. We feel the touch of Christ.

Seventh is to know the dreams of your partner. The article reads, "I do not believe you can really know someone until you know his or her dreams." Do you know the dreams in the mind of God? Do you know how much God desires that people live in peace with each other? Do you know how badly God wants those pushed to the margins of society to be loved and lifted up? Do you know that God dreams of the day when the blind will see, the captives released, and the oppressed set free?

If you want to know God's dreams you need to read and study God's book. This book, this Bible, is God's book of dreams. It contains the record of God's activity in the lives of ordinary people throughout history. Stories of how God's dream was realized and how it was not. But the dream is still alive today and you and I are being asked to be a part of it. Staying in love with God is about keeping God's dream in our hearts and minds.

The final relationship strengthener is to ask questions. This is one I like because I have struggled with questions about God and the world once I gave myself permission

to do so. In this church we try to create a safe place where people can ask questions about God. I've often thought that we should be known as St. John United Methodist Church, where it's okay to ask questions. I think the people who are not in church whose empty seats we see around us have questions about God. And many of them don't trust churches as safe enough places to ask their questions. In some churches it is seen as heresy just to voice certain questions. What if, God forbid, we allowed ourselves to ask the ultimate question, "God, do you exist?" Aren't Christians supposed to believe and not doubt?

The story is told of a child who had a Sunday school teacher who told her that it was wrong to ask questions and have doubts. So she asked yet another question: "Is God afraid of my questions and doubts?" She came to realize that God's not afraid but the teacher sure was. That's our view in this church. God can handle our questions. We need to eliminate the fear that may come with asking certain questions. Staying in love with God is all about getting rid of fear. The Bible says there is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear! (1 John 4:18)

Author Perry Pascarella writes about a story in Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon Days*. Muriel Kebsback, a sickly 17-year-old, spends much of her time looking for signs and omens. One day when she goes to a clearing in the woods, she feels that a vision or miracle is about to occur. She fantasizes that Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility will give her a message of great importance like the one received by the children of Fatima. The pope would then send an emissary to hear the message. But she would decline to reveal it until a time more than 20 years later. In the meantime, a shrine would be built in this place. And in the proper year, she would reveal the message from God: Are you ready for this direct message from God? Be nice.¹

Be nice was the most powerful message that poor Muriel could conceive. It's not bad. Not too complex. Perhaps profound in its simplicity. And who could dispute its value? But guess what? Be nice is not the message of Jesus. We are not here to simply be nice. We are here to do no harm. We are here to do good. We are here to stay in love with God. May we all be challenged to live by these three simple rules.

¹ --Perry Pascarella, *The Ten Commandments of the Workplace and How to Break Them Every Day* (New York: Viking, 1998), 34.