



The People of God Who Attend the Ordinances of God

1 John 4:7-12

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Good morning, and again – HAPPY EASTER!

I know, we've all but completely moved on from Easter outside the church walls. In fact, I even bought a Christmas Tree last week, thanks to a 50% off Spring Sale. But rest assured, as long as the white cloth is hanging behind me, Easter is still in season. So let us rejoice and proclaim, He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

In the midst of this Easter Season, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church will be holding one of its quadrennial meetings. This is the first Quadrennial meeting since 2016, as COVID postponed the 2020 meeting until now. In the weird ways we do things in the Church, the General Conference session that is meeting this year is actually the 2020 General Conference session. We are still waiting to hear what will become of the 2024 session.

Delegates from all over the globe have already started travelling to Charlotte, NC, where the General Conference will begin on Tuesday this week. Last week I sent out some infographics to help you better understand the structure of the United Methodist Church, and the purpose of the General Conference. This week, I'll be sending out a list of the Delegates from the Virginia Conference, so that you might hold them in your prayers during the General Conference Session, which is a 10-day whirlwind of worship services, prayer, committee meetings, plenary gatherings, and all the Roberts Rules your heart may ever desire.

There will be a live stream of the full sessions at General Conference if you find yourself wanting to pop-in and catch some of the action, and our Virginia Delegation will be offering a daily wrap up to keep all of us in the Commonwealth up-to-speed on all that's happening in Charlotte.

In light of the General Conference taking place, we're using this Easter Season to consider a bit about our Methodist heritage. What does it mean to be a United Methodist, or part of the United Methodist Church? To guide these thoughts, we're looking at the three General Rules of the Church, which were first penned by John Wesley in 1743, and adopted by the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784.

The three rules are Do No Harm, Do Good, and Attend the Ordinances of God. Over the past two weeks, we've covered the first two, so today we turn to the third rule: Attend the Ordinances of God.

As we were fellowshiping after worship last Sunday, I had someone (in anticipation of this week) already asking me, "what are the ordinances of God?"

What do you think? What are the ordinances of God? Perhaps we should start with, what are ordinances? If you google the word "ordinance," you will find the word defined as "an authoritative order; a decree." As it refers to the Bible, our passage in 1 John 5 gives us some guidance here.

The apostle John writes, starting in verse 2, "By this way, we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith."

There are two things named in this passage that help guide the third General Rule. First, we are instructed to obey the commandments of God. In his explanation of the rule, John Wesley categorized the commandments of God into works of piety and works of mercy. These two groupings are understood as inward and outward spiritual disciplines.

The works of piety, or the inward spiritual disciplines, include things like bible study, prayer, fasting, and worship. The inward disciplines align our spiritual focus on God. If you comb through the Biblical text, you will find all kinds of commandments – or ordinances – that refer to the way in which we center our faith on God. "Have no Gods before me." "Observe the sabbath." "The land shall be given a sabbath rest every seventh year." "Pray without ceasing." "Do not worship false idols." "You can only serve one master, for you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other."

The list of commandments we are given in the Biblical text is long when it comes to works of piety, and these ordinances invite us to center our being on God. Indeed, as we read a couple weeks ago, we are invited to have the commandments of God written on the tablet of our heart.

For as many commandments call us to focus on our inward self, it is just as important that we look at the commandments that turn us outward. Works of mercy are just as important as works of piety ... indeed, if our inward piety does not turn us outward, we are not likely worshipping the God of creation, for the God of creation is always concerned about the well-being of the community.

Outward disciplines would include anything that invites us to care for others beyond ourselves, such as visiting the sick, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, praying for those in need, and even tending to those grieving a loss. Just as with the inward disciplines, the Biblical text is chalk full of such ordinances. "Do not steal." "Welcome the stranger." "Just as you have done to the least of these, you have done to me." "When you fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, you have done such things to me." "Care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner." "Go and sell all that you have, giving the proceeds to the poor."

Just as with the works of piety, the list of commandments we are given in the Biblical text is long when it comes to works of mercy, and these ordinances invite us to center our being on God.

Attend the ordinances of God is, in somewhat simpler terms, a call to engage in the works of piety and works of mercy that are commanded throughout the Biblical text.

Now, let's be honest about our personal capacity to know and attend everything that is printed in the Biblical text. There are roughly 613 commandments in the Hebrew Scripture of the Old Testament. There are another 1050 commands offered in the Greek New Testament. That means there's over 1600 rules and commands in the whole of the Biblical text. Even if we're gracious with ourselves and remove the duplicates, because there are a lot of those commands that say roughly the same thing, we're still looking at probably 750 to 1,000 commands that we would want to "attend."

Which is why I think the apostle John writes about these commands in the way that he does. Let's turn back to 1 John 5 for a moment. I said earlier that there are two ways John's writing helps us understand the third General Rule. Let us hear it again as the apostle writes, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey the commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments."

In each sentence here around the call to faithfulness being associated with obeying commandments, the apostle also defines faithfulness as being attuned to the love of God. In fact, the Biblical invitation to obey the commandments of God is so intricately linked with the love of God, that in his book on the Three General Rules, titled, "Three Simple Ways: A Wesleyan Way of Living," the late Bishop Rueben Job re-worded the third rule. He lists the three as, "Do no Harm, Do Good, and *Stay in Love with God.*"

That's right, he reworded the rule to "attend the ordinances of God," offering in its place, "stay in love with God."

To understand this change, we need only back up one chapter in 1 John, as the apostle's writing underscores this change in chapter 4. Let us again hear the words of the apostle, beginning in verse 7 of chapter 4: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

Of all the ways the apostle could have defined God, he opts to boil it down to this: God is love.

Regardless what this means, because the apostle holds off that clarity, at first read, this doesn't seem like it is helping *us* attend the ordinances of God. This is a statement about *God*, not a statement about *us*. *God* is love.

But the apostle does add in the clarity, and we find that this statement does impact *our* being. Let us understand the clarifying language of the apostle.

Because God is love, anyone who is born of God and knows God will also be love. If a person does not love, they must not know God. The apostle declares that because God is love, love comes from God, and should thus be second nature to those who belong to God. One cannot say they are of God if they do not love.

And what does it mean to love? How do we know what this love is, or what it means for us? Good questions. Thankfully, the apostle answers them for us.

"In this is love," verse 10 offers, "not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent the Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

This is how we know the measure of God's love, the apostle says; this is how we know what love itself is. Love is defined as Christ's faithfulness to the will of God to teach the hard things he taught, to suffer the consequences of standing up against the empire and leaders of the faith, to die on the cross, to rise from the dead, and to be the resurrected witness of God's love in the world.

In this commitment of Christ to the will of God, we can easily see the ordinances of God in their full glory. Christ was wholly devoted to God – practicing the inward disciplines of piety: worshipping, praying, and devoting himself to God. And we can see in Christ the outward disciplines of mercy: healing, feeding, and restoring people to the community. All of these ordinances come together in a single package that is defined by the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, and the apostle wraps it all up by saying, "this is the love of God." This is how we know what God's love is: just look at Christ.

And then, as the apostle closes this section out, he makes one more definitive statement that John Wesley really took hold of. In fact, Wesley – and the people called Methodists – hold on to this claim more than any other denominational grouping. The apostle writes, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and *God's love is perfected in us.*"

God's love is perfected in us.

John Wesley believed, and the principles of our Methodist tradition still claim this foundation, that we are going on to perfection *in this lifetime*. Let's clarify this statement. This does not mean that we can be good enough at attending the ordinances of God that we can be perfect, as Christ is perfect. In fact, that's not even close to what the apostle says. The apostle says, and Wesley upheld, that God's love "is perfected in us." Not that we are somehow able to be perfect on our own, but that God's love might be perfected in us. God's love is so all-encompassing, that if we but love God, the love of God will take root in us so fully, that God's love might be perfected in us.

But again, we have to revisit the communal nature of this love, because the Biblical text is clear that God's love is not about self-glory (or even self-righteousness). It's not about us being perfected. God's love is all in for the greater well-being of creation on the whole. So how does God's love even begin to be perfected in us? The apostle writes, "*If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is*

perfected in us.” The whole process of being perfected in God’s love begins with our love for one another.

We have to love God enough that we may be willing to put aside our fear of the other, our hatred for the other, our “othering” of the other. We have to love God enough to love one another.

Because God is love, we have the capacity to love, and by being in love with God, we take on the love of God to love the other. And the love we have for God that leads us to love one another is amplified, as God’s love is then perfected in us.

And so it makes sense that of all the commandments – of all the ordinances – we may be asked to attend, when he was asked which was the greatest, Christ declared, “the first is this: love the Lord your God; and the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.”

This is the third rule: Attend the Ordinances of God. Or perhaps, better stated by Bishop Rueben Job, “Stay in love with God.” So may it be. Amen.