

This week, as we continue our Christian Journey, we explore God’s way of loving ourselves and others. Our position as a church, meaning our Free Methodist denominational position, is taken from the Free Methodist Book of Discipline paragraph **158**. It reads as follows:

¶158 As a people, we live wholesome and holy lives and show mercy to all, ministering to both their physical and spiritual needs. We commit ourselves to be free from activities and attitudes that defile the mind and harm the body, or promote the same; we commit ourselves to respect the worth of all persons as created in the image of God; we commit ourselves to strive to be just and honest in all our relationships and dealings. This we do, by God’s grace and power.

Question: **“Why?”**

Why do we, as a church, hold this position? Is this a flowery mission statement that a committee cobbled together to sound good? I don’t think so. In fact, the very soul of God’s greatest commandments is encapsulated in this paragraph.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandments were (Mark 12:28-31) he answered in this way:

Mark 12:28-31 ²⁸ *One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* ²⁹ *Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”*

In the Membership Covenant this paragraph (¶158) is broken down into a set of goals that relate to the care of ourselves and others. These goals can be realized only by God’s grace and power. These goals help to put us in alignment with what Jesus stated in the passage from Mark’s Gospel.

- ¶3200 “As a people, we live wholesome and holy lives and show mercy to all, ministering to both their physical and spiritual needs.” (¶158)
- ¶3210 “We commit ourselves to be free from activities and attitudes that defile the mind and harm the body, or promote the same.” (¶158)
- ¶3220 “We commit ourselves to respect the worth of all persons as created in the image of God.” (¶158)
- ¶3230 “We commit ourselves to strive to be just and honest in all our relationships and dealings.” (¶158)

Question: **“How?”**

How does paragraph (¶158) relate to God’s greatest and most important commandments?

...How do these precepts relate to one another?

<i>Loving God</i>	<i>Living wholesome and holy lives</i>
<i>Loving God with all my <u>heart</u></i>	<i>Showing mercy to all...</i>
<i>with all my <u>soul</u>...</i>	<i>ministering to physical</i>
<i>with all my <u>strength</u>...</i>	<i>ministering to spiritual needs</i>
<i>with all my <u>mind</u>...</i>	<i>Free ourselves from activities that:</i>
<i>Loving my neighbor</i>	<i>defile the mind</i>
<i>Loving myself</i>	<i>harm the body</i>
<i>Loving my neighbor as myself...</i>	<i>Respect the worth of all persons as created in the image of God</i>

I believe the bond, or common denominator, between these precepts is **love**. The first letter of John tells us emphatically that “**God is love**” (1 John 4:16). Therefore, the practical understanding of love is defined to us in the **character of God**. Ultimately, the greatest example of God’s character is shown to us through His dealings with man through the Old Testament Scriptures and is visibly manifest in the life of Christ as depicted in the Gospel accounts of the New Testament narrative. I think we are safe to say if we want to honor the greatest commandments, we should live the way Jesus lived. Coincidentally, this is God’s plan for us; we are created in His image (holy, pure, love, undefiled, creator, sustainer, unified, whole, and complete). Jesus Christ is the visible image of God and it is (and has been from the beginning of time) His plan that we be fully transformed and restored to that image; His Image (Genesis 1:26-27; Colossians 1:15; Romans 8:29). Remember also the stated goal of the Christian Journey from a few weeks ago; “that we should reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (**Ephesians 4:13**).

Love also has a mission. Love’s mission is the Kingdom of God...

We define the kingdom of God as the domain over which God is sovereign, but I think that is somewhat nebulous...or vague. More specifically, we might define the Kingdom of God existing wherever God's will is at work. And God's will is at work wherever people are faithful to the command that we love one another as God first loved us.

Question: “**What?**”

What does the Kingdom of God look like in practical terms? It looks like God’s will at work. God’s will is that we love one another as He has first loved us. He loves us with life, provision, kindness, gentleness, truth, longsuffering, self-sacrifice, guidance, and forgiveness...and these are just a few of the ways He loves us.

Looking around... in the sphere our personal lives, within the constructs of our communities in general and society on the whole, and ultimately looking upon the global stage of our world... we must pose the honest questions; **“Do I see God’s Kingdom?” “Am I seeking God’s Kingdom?”**

For all too many of us, we have reduced God’s Kingdom and the pathway to it as a list of “do’s and don’ts.” Giving a cursory glance at our own Free Methodist Book of Discipline might even support this reduction. With regard to section paragraph ¶3200 we talk of “self-discipline” and bondage to addictive behaviors (smoking, drinking, eating, pornography), substance abuse, habits surrounding our entertainment (gambling, music, things we read and things we watch), issues pertaining to sexuality and its practices, habits of conduct in the workplace and home...and this is just some of the list. Is the Christian Journey, seeking God’s Kingdom, becoming like Christ about following “do’s and don’ts”? I think the answer is **“no” in the strictest interpretation**, but I think the answer is **“yes” with consideration to today’s big picture** (which is God’s way of loving ourselves and others).

Ask Questions:

1. What does God look like (His character traits)?
2. What does the Kingdom of God look like (to your imagination)?

Let me show you what I mean by “no” and “yes” with a couple of passages of Scripture (you should write these down in their full context and go back to check them later). Paul writes the following to the church in Rome:

Romans 14:17-23 ¹⁷ **For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.** ¹⁸ **If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too.** ¹⁹ **So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.** ²⁰ *Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble.* ²¹ *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble.* ²² *You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right.* ²³ *But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.*

To this end, **the Kingdom of God** is not about a list of “do’s and don’ts,” but it is a life of goodness and peace and joy displayed in the radiant reflection of the Holy Spirit of God who dwells within you. You do not become righteous and Christlike because of the things you do... You act as you do because of the Presence of Christ within you.

Question to self: *“Is the desire within me longing to satisfy the sinful nature of my flesh or is my inner desire longing to satisfy the undefiled purity of God’s Image that is evidenced in the life of Jesus Christ?”*

The second passage I want to share with you in illustration of our point is a second letter from the apostle Paul; this one is to the Corinthian church. Please write down this following passage:

Corinthians 6:9-20 ⁹ Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people -- none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. ¹¹ Some of you were once like that. **But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.** ¹² You say, "I am allowed to do anything" -- **but not everything is good for you. And even though "I am allowed to do anything," I must not become a slave to anything.** ¹³ You say, "Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food." (This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them.) But you can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies. ¹⁴ And God will raise us from the dead by his power, just as he raised our Lord from the dead. ¹⁵ Don't you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which is part of Christ, and join it to a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ And don't you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, "The two are united into one." ¹⁷ But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. ¹⁸ Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. ¹⁹ **Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself,** ²⁰ **for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.**

To this end, the **Kingdom of God** is inclusive of things you do and don't do. Here we recognize that we have been changed and we realize the gravity of that change...meaning we realize our body is the **temple of the Holy Spirit**. We live as though we understand we do not belong to ourselves, but **we belong to God**. We treat ourselves with honor due that of our God because we are His. We are concerned about our **mind** (*intellect*), we are concerned with our **heart** (*passion*), we are concerned with our **strength** (*physical health*), and we are concerned with our **soul** (*spiritual development*). We are *Eikons* (living images-reflections of God), we are to become transformed into the likeness and person of our Savior, Jesus Christ...we are "**Christians**." The things we do as we conduct and engage in our daily lives and relationships directly affect our process of transformation to the image of Christ. The adage; "Garbage in – Garbage out" is very true in this respect.

I asked the question earlier; "**Why?**" Why do we hold the position we are discussing this morning; this commitment to loving ourselves and loving others the way God loves us? Because this is God's will. This was the will of Jesus Christ, the Mission of Jesus Christ, and the Mission of God. As we love ourselves as God loves us, we become like Him. As we become like Him we focus on His mission. His mission is **wholly** restoration.

Our following the Mission of God will lead us to the Kingdom of God. The **final question** you may wish to ask yourself is; "**Am I following the Mission of God and does my life reflect that mission?**" If yes, are you fully engaged in the mission? If you are not engaged, now would be the time to make that renewal of commitment.

Week #4 — The Christian Journey Rules of the Road: God's Way of Loving Ourselves and Others

Big Idea = *Learning to Care for Ourselves and Others* (¶158) ¶3200

- Promotion of healthy living (physically, emotionally, spiritually) ¶3210 - ¶3215
- The Worth of all Persons ¶3221
- Commitment to Righteousness; striving to be just and honest in all relationships (¶158)

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¶3200 In the Membership Covenant our second set of goals relates to the care of ourselves and others. These goals can be realized only by God's grace and power. "As a people, we live wholesome and holy lives and show mercy to all, ministering to both their physical and spiritual needs."

¶3210 "We commit ourselves to be free from activities and attitudes that defile the mind and harm the body, or promote the same."

¶3220 "We commit ourselves to respect the worth of all persons as created in the image of God."

¶3230 "We commit ourselves to strive to be just and honest in all our relationships and dealings."

^{NLT} **Ephesians 4:29** Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

^{NLT} **Philippians 4:8** And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

^{NLT} **1 Thessalonians 4:7** God has called us to live holy lives, not impure lives. (Context = **1 Thessalonians 4:1-7**)

^{ESV} **1 John 2:15** Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

^{NLT} **James 4:4** You adulterers! Don't you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God.

^{NIV} **Proverbs 19:28** A corrupt witness mocks at justice, and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil.

^{NIV} **Revelation 21:8** But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-- their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."