It's not uncommon to find ridiculousness in the pages of Scripture. In addition to complex metaphor, vivid image, and storytelling that raises even 21st century eyebrows, there's also stuff that just plain makes no sense. How could you give to everyone who begs from you – isn't that a recipe for ending up a beggar yourself? Why would you pray for people who want you dead, or invite someone you don't like to a dinner party – that certainly isn't in your best interest.

And there we have it: self-interest. Large swaths of the Bible are nonsensical because we're supposed to take care of ourselves, reward ourselves, pay ourselves – FIRST. We have been taught to serve our own happiness which means doing more, getting more, having more, even if we have to close our eyes to the person standing at field's edge or strike back at someone who tries to take what's ours. But Jesus calls us to a higher way than our natural inclination.

Evenso, all of the "be a good boy" or "be a good girl" stuff we try to teach our children and practice ourselves can come off as unexciting and bland. Maybe even boring. The not-so-good stuff often seems more interesting and appealing. And isn't that the problem we have even with some of Jesus' words?

For example, take those in today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek, give to everyone who begs from you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, go a second mile with the one who forces you to go the first mile, and to the one who wants to take your sweater, well, give your coat as well. Where's the thrill in doing stuff like that?

We might throw all these teachings from Jesus in the "do-no-harm" category. When someone bad-mouths you or does you wrong, you have to decide how you're going to react. You can hit back, which may well make matters worse, or you can turn the other cheek, refusing to add to the problem. You are doing no harm.

If you choose to strike back, you can find plenty of ideas online. Like www.getrevenge.com, www.thepayback.com and www.getrevengeonyourex.com. These websites, and others like them, will help you learn how to send nasty e-mails, anonymous letters, dead fish, noxious flowers and how to -- in general -- make someone miserable. You could do that. But if you do, you're not only NOT following Jesus, you're pretty much stepping outside socially-accepted mores and constraints. Your call.

Probably, we can quickly agree that doing no harm is a good thing, but it doesn't grip us the way confrontation and discord does. Take the Genesis story of Cain and Abel. Theologians and pastors agree that Cain was the bad guy, but they also agree that from the story angle, he was the more interesting character. Abel, who does all the right things and is approved by God, doesn't generate nearly as much discussion or interest as does Cain. Some have said that without Cain there wouldn't have been the conflict necessary for creating a good story.

You see, that's the problem with not doing harm; it's not something active like doing
harm, or even like doing good. In many circumstances, not making matters worse is the right thing, but it's hard to generate much enthusiasm about it.

But then, since when was the excitement quotient the primary measure of how we should serve God? Where is our Christian foundation; that which guides our lives? There's a classic joke that tells of a preacher leading a children's sermon. He asks the kids, "What is brown, has a bushy tail, lives in trees and eats nuts?" One kid shouts in response, "I think it's a squirrel, but I'm going to say Jesus!"

It seems like Jesus is always the right answer in church, right? But in this case, it's true. What is the foundation of the Christian life? Jesus Christ — his forgiveness, redemption and guidance in our lives. And anyone who has God's Spirit within him or her — any true believer — is given this foundation.

We may recognize "First, do no harm" as a tenet from the medical world, where, we understand, it's a basic principle of health care. But it also belongs to the world of religion. In 1739, a small group of people in London approached John Wesley (who was the founder of the Methodist Church) asking for his guidance for living spiritually upright lives. He organized them into a group to meet weekly for the purpose of spiritual growth and moral examination, and he gave them three general rules to guide their behavior. The second and third of these were, respectively, do good and practice the spiritual disciplines (attend worship, pray, study the Scriptures, etc.). Those two might well have been expected advice for spiritual development. But before mentioning those, Wesley stated his first principle: "It is therefore expected of all who continue [in the group meetings] that they should continue to evidence their desire of salvation, First: By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind ...."

That's bedrock Christian behavior, as Jesus' comments about cheek-turning, second-mile-going and cloak-giving suggest. And the Sermon on the Mount is not the only place in the New Testament where such do-no-harm teaching shows up. In Peter's first epistle, the apostle made this observation about Jesus: "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten ..." (2:23). Doing no harm is not just something Jesus talked about, but also something he practiced.

If we were to turn over to Leviticus 19 we would get a perspective on this do-no-harm practice which is part of the holiness code of ancient Israel. At the beginning of the chapter, God commands the people to be holy and then goes into details. Most of the chapter is about doing no harm:

- Do not steal
- Do not lie
- Do not create problems for the disabled
- Do not slander
- Do not deal falsely
- Do not defraud your workers
- Do not render false judgments
- Do not take vengeance

In fact, it's only after the list of how to avoid doing harm that God gives them a command about something to do: Love you neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18). In other words, part of loving our neighbors, which is a command that Jesus also said was critical, is --
wait for it -- *doing no harm!*

There is another website devoted to the do-no-harm practice (www.donoharm.us/index.html). It makes no claim to be a religious site, but is the work of two men who believe the world would be a better place if we all tried, as a first principle, to do no harm. The opening copy on their website reads:

“We seem to be living in a world that is getting less hospitable every day. Look closely at any endeavor our species has engaged in and it appears we are unaware of the harm we do, we ignore the harm we do, we intentionally do harm for our own gain, or sadly in some cases we do harm for our own pleasure and enjoyment. Has no one taught us to do no harm?

If we haven’t been taught to do no harm, we see no harm in doing harm. We cause harm and shrug it off. We cause harm and laugh about it. We cause harm and brag about it. Sadder still, our children bear witness to our actions and never learn to do no harm themselves. Above all else we must teach our children, by example and instruction, this basic moral principle of life.

We must begin to make better choices and treat each other, the other creatures who share this planet with us, and this planet we call home with greater respect and compassion.

We believe that the first and most basic moral law is, "Do no harm." Because we can feel pain and suffering, we can imagine the pain and suffering of others, and we can act accordingly to minimize the harm we cause.”

One of the ways that John Wesley explained his general rule to do no harm was also from the "do not" category. He said that we should not do to others as we would not want them to do to us. That's obviously the flip side of the Golden Rule, but fully in keeping with the intention of the Golden Rule.

Almost every day we're in situations or problems and we have no idea how to make them better. But we're pretty clear on how to not make them worse.

How do we NOT make situations worse than they already are, you ask? Think back to what I just said comes from the Book of Leviticus - but in addition, we do NOT:

- Interfere (as a rule, this is good advice) - Tell tales, spread rumors, etc.
- Blame others for your screw-ups - Bore people to death by going on and on about your problems
- Vent your anger on people (family and friends, e.g.) who are not involved in your situation - Disparage others to make yourself look good - Bear false witness

Starting from a position of doing no harm is related to the spiritual discipline of *submission*. Submission is a spirit with which we view others, and in which we relate to and treat them. It's the willingness not to get our own way, and the ability to lay down the burden of needing to come out on top.

In fact, in some situations, *submission is the freedom to drop the matter*, to forget it, not in the spirit of "Whatever!" (which often means "I'm not going to waste any more time on you!")
or with passive-aggressive behavior (which is seeming to agree with someone but actually dragging one’s heels about cooperating), but in genuine willingness to let the other person have his or her say.

Richard Foster, who wrote the book Celebration of Discipline said, "Usually the best way to handle most matters of submission is to say nothing," which he says is the kind of grace that sets others free. He also says that submission, which puts aside our own need to be the center of attention, frees us to actually value others.

**But Submission has its limits.**
The following was posted on the Craigslist personals a few years ago:

To the Guy Who Tried to Mug Me in Downtown Savannah night before last at 1:43 a.m. EST.  I was the guy wearing the black Burberry jacket that you demanded that I hand over, shortly after you pulled the knife on me and my girlfriend, threatening our lives. You also asked for my girlfriend’s purse and earrings. I can only hope that you somehow come across this rather important message.

First, I’d like to apologize for your embarrassment, I didn’t expect you to actually soil your pants when I drew my pistol after you took my jacket. The evening was not that cold, and I was wearing the jacket for a reason. My girlfriend had just bought me that Kimber Model 1911 .45 A CP pistol for my birthday, and we had picked up a shoulder holster for it that very evening. Obviously you agree that it is a very intimidating weapon when pointed at your head ... isn’t it! I know it probably wasn’t fun walking back to wherever you’d come from. ... I’m sure it was even worse walking barefooted since I made you leave your shoes, cell phone and wallet with me. (That prevented you from calling or running to your buddies to come help mug us again.)

After I called your mother, or “Momma” as you had her listed in your cell, I explained the entire episode of what you’d done. Then I went and filled up my gas tank as well as four other people’s in the gas station on your credit card. The guy with the big motor home took 150 gallons and was extremely grateful! I gave your shoes to a homeless guy outside Vinnie Van Go Go’s, along with all the cash in your wallet. (That made his day!) I then threw your wallet into the big pink “pimp mobile” that was parked at the curb ... after I broke the windshield and side window and keyed the entire driver’s side of the car.

On your cell phone I managed to get in two threatening phone calls to the DA’s office and one to the FBI, while mentioning President Obama as my possible target. The FBI guy seemed really intense, and we had a nice long chat (I guess while he traced your number, etc.). ... I feel this type of retribution is a far more appropriate punishment for your threatened crime. I wish you well as you try to sort through some of these rather immediate pressing issues, and can only hope that you have the opportunity to reflect upon, and perhaps reconsider, the career path you’ve chosen to pursue in life. Remember, next time you might not be so lucky. Have a good day!

When it becomes destructive not to take positive action, then active love for one's neighbor needs to take over. Even in the world of medicine, with its first-do-no-harm ethic, there is a point where that must be put aside. Many of us know that some medical treatment can have a harmful effect at the outstart but the goal is to eradicate the disease being treated.
In our daily lives, however, most of the situations we deal with are not life-threatening. They're not extreme evil, but are rather differences of opinion or merely somebody's self-centeredness or hang-up showing. And often the way we love that neighbor or person with whom we're not seeing eye-to-eye is by first doing no harm. At the risk of repeating ourselves:

- That may sometimes take the form of saying nothing.
- It may sometimes take the form of not passing along gossip.
- It may sometimes take the form of giving the other person some room to work things out.
- It may sometimes take the form of compromise and seeking the common good.
- It almost always requires our thinking about what doing no harm means in that particular situation, and then practicing what we've concluded.

Such techniques are in contrast to the woman who left her house and went down to the mall to do her errands. To her disgust, she found every shop to have a nauseating smell. She then went to the dry-cleaners at frowned at the odor. At the grocery store it was no different and as she was checking out she barked at the clerk about the odor. Her last stop was at the bank and she found a sewer-like smell and she gave no mercy to that clerk either. Returning home, she discovered she had stepped in something earlier in the day, and she herself had been carrying the smell around with her everywhere she went.

Actively living the Scriptures means that doing no harm exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees. Instead of hitting back, turn the other cheek. Instead of making a big fuss about being forced to go one mile, volunteer to go a second mile. And instead of seeking to hurt your enemies, pray for them.

Intentionally doing no harm is a vital practice in living a holy life. It is a way of loving our neighbor. And Jesus gives us examples of how it's done -- turning the other check, loving our enemies, and so on -- and models in his own life the returning of good for evil. This is the new ethic of God's world. This is the way people behave in God's world.

There do come those times when we are dealing with a threatening thing, where we must hasten to help. But some of the time, at a minimum, not making matters worse is a Christian thing to do. "First, do no harm" may sound unexciting, but it is an aspect of the "ethics of God's world," and it has the power to change the world in a positive way.