

Making Peace in a World of Conflict

SERIES: *THE LIFE GOD BLESSES*

At one time or another, all of us find ourselves trying to resolve conflict. We might be the ones fighting, or we might be the ones in the middle. Either way, it's not a lot of fun. Either way, you can get hurt.

But Jesus comes to us in the seventh Beatitude and says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacemakers may get hurt, but Jesus congratulates them; he calls them blessed.

We live in a world that is good at talking about peace, but not very good at making it. Washington D.C. is full of peace monuments; a new one goes up after every war. Someone said that peace is that one glorious moment in history when nations stop to reload. World War I was called "the war to end all wars." Thirty years later World War II came along. After it finally ended, everyone was concerned about keeping the peace, so they created the United Nations for that very purpose. Its motto was "to have succeeding generations free from the scourge of war." Since that time there has not been one single day of peace on earth.

We don't have domestic peace either. There are more books on how to have a happy marriage than ever before. There is an abundance of well-trained counselors ready and willing to help keep our marriages together, but the divorce rate continues to skyrocket.

Everyone wants peace, but few have it. We're good at talking about peace, but we're not very good at making it. Jesus doesn't say, "Blessed are the peace lovers." Nor does he say, "Blessed are those who put in a good word for peace." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who make peace."

Maybe the reason why we're not very good at this is we really don't understand what peace is.

I. What is peace?

Someone defined peace as the absence of conflict. That may be a good place to start, but I'm not sure it's a good place to end. There is no conflict in a cemetery, but there's no real life or peace either. Two people might settle their conflict by shooting each other in the head; their conflict is over, but so is their lives.

Some people view peace as a kind of truce. I've known married couples who have lived together in a kind of armed truce for years. I don't call that peace. I call that a cold war.

Some people adopt a peace at an all cost mentality. They avoid issues that might bring conflict. They don't really deal with the problem, they just ignore it. Jesus never told us to opt for peace at all cost. On one occasion Jesus said, "**Do not think I came to bring peace on earth; I did not come to bring peace,**

but a sword." He said he would set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother (Mt. 10:34). Jesus knew that there would be times when standing for the truth would cause division.

Peace is not the absence or avoidance of conflict. The peace which Jesus talks about is not a negative; it's a positive. It's not just the absence of conflict, it's the presence of God's goodness and righteousness.

The Hebrew word Shalom is the word Jews used for peace. When Jews greeted someone with that word, they didn't just wish the absence of conflict, they were wishing the presence of all God's best for them; his righteousness, his goodness, his rest, his wholeness.

When the NT writers talked about peace, they never divorced it from purity and righteousness. James writes, "**The seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace**" (James 3:18). Peace produces righteousness. The two go together. The writer of Hebrews says, "**Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification (holiness) without which no one will see the Lord**" (Heb. 12:14) You don't pursue peace at the expense of holiness. The two go together.

So when Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," he's not talking about people who go around and just try not to make waves. He's not talking about those who compromise without conviction. He's not talking about those who live in denial that there are important issues that might divide us. If Jesus is the model, biblical peacemakers can make a lot of waves; they can upset a lot of people.

I came from a home where everything was quiet and controlled. I had just one brother. There was conflict in our home, but most of the time it was pushed beneath the surface. I'm a conflict avoider. I just want everyone to get along. And then I got married. Lynn comes from a family of five girls. Nothing was pushed beneath the surface. You fought for the bathroom. You fought for a drumstick. As you can imagine, coming from homes like this, we have different ways of dealing with issues. I just want problems to go away. I just want to provide a quick fix. Anything is better than a fight. But, I've had to learn, that's not always true. The absence of conflict does not mean the presence of God's peace. Sometimes you have to dive right into the middle of some tough issues to find God's peace.

So with that in mind, what does peacemaking really look like? How do we go about really making peace?

II. How to make peace?

The most important thing to realize is that peacemaking is active rather than passive; it requires that we go out of our way; it requires that we do something. And, often times, it requires that we pay a price. The peace that Jesus is talking about is active and costly.

The verb Jesus uses here for “making peace” is used only one other time in the entire New Testament. I want you to see this because it gets right to the heart of what it takes to make peace. In Colossians 1 Paul is writing to the church at Colossia about the preeminence of Jesus Christ. He wants them to know that Christ is their all in all. He is God. He is the head of creation. All things were made by him and for him. He is the head of the church. Starting in v. 19 Paul talks about how as the head of the church, and as the one in whom all the fullness of God dwelt, Christ was used to make peace with us,

“For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach...”

Notice WHEN the Father made peace. He made peace while we were “alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds.” The idea here is that while we were shaking our fists at God, he acted on our behalf. In reconciling us to himself, he acted first. He went out of his way. He did something. But notice also HOW the Father made peace with us - through Christ; through the blood of the cross. So not only was his peacemaking active, it was costly. Today is Palm Sunday. We are moving into what Christ-followers have always considered a holy week. It’s the week we commemorate the events leading up to and including his death. This week as you focus on the cross, think about it in terms of peacemaking. The only reason we have peace with God is because he acted on our behalf in the costliest of ways. He sent his Son to pay the price for reconciliation.

Peacemaking will never cost us quite what it cost God, but it will still be costly. Let’s talk about where that might apply. First, it applies to OUR own relationship with others. Romans 12:18 says, **“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”** Now that applies to both our so-called friends and enemies.

Look at Matthew 5:23-24,

“If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

Jesus is talking here about relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus says making peace with a brother is more important than religious ceremonies. Presenting an offering at the altar was going to church. Jesus says, “Don’t bother coming to church if you’re bothered with a friend. Before you come to church, you go and make things right with your friend.” Peacemaking is more important than church-playing. We have church growth experts today that tell us how to fill all the seats in our church. It seems that Jesus wasn’t into church growth. If we all did this, we would have massive church reduction! Notice Jesus says it’s when your brother has something against YOU that you should act. I think he says that because if I have something against my friend, and he doesn’t know about it, I can take care of that before God. But if he has something against me, and I know about it, I ought to go make it right. It doesn’t matter who is right or who is wrong. It just says YOU go and be reconciled. And there may be a price to pay for that. It might be the pain of saying, “I’m sorry. I blew it. I was wrong. Would you forgive me?” It might be the pain of saying to that person, “What you did was wrong.” It might be the pain of having to forgive that person when they ask for it. In any case, YOU are acting, and there is a cost.

But if we move a little down the page we can see another scenario. Look at vv. 43-45,

“You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Here we’re dealing with enemies. Jesus has in mind here those who hate us because of our connection with him. We are to even be peacemakers with them. We are to love them and pray for them. We are to do what God does. He gives to them every day. They never thank him. They never acknowledge him. I saw an interview recently of a young lady who looked into the camera and said, “God is dead.” Now God could have just zapped her right there, but instead he just keeps on showering her with his blessings. She gets to enjoy God’s sunshine just like you and me. Jesus says, “You do the same. Find ways to build bridges with people like that. Find ways to bless them.” To do that requires an entirely different way of viewing people. We have to see them not as the enemy, but as victims of the Enemy, just like we were! We have to see them as people who are trapped and blind and in need of mercy.

Sometimes we aren’t the ones in the conflict, but we are observers of a conflict. We should be peacemakers there, too. Maybe it’s a marriage that we know is in trouble. How can we help make peace there? Maybe it’s a church that is battling over some issue. How can we make peace there? Maybe it’s some close friends who can’t get along. Sometimes, because of our own selfishness, we like it when friends aren’t getting along, because their friendship rivals our friendship. So we do little things to nurse the conflict along. We tell Mary what Jane said about her, and then we tell Jane what Mary said about her. The whole time we’re pretending to help, but we are making the rift deeper. Again, it’s

costly to be a peacemaker. There is the pain of listening to both sides. The pain of setting aside our own prejudice and striving to understand both points of view. There is the pain of misunderstanding. There is the pain of failure.

You know, the only way we can be peacemakers is to have an entirely new view of ourselves. Once again, I point out to you the first six Beatitudes. We can't be peacemakers without marching through the deep waters of these first six. The peacemaker will have to be humble and broken before God as we see in the first three. You can't be a peacemaker if you're always looking at how things affect YOU. If your perspective on life is self-centered, peacemaking is impossible. But once you recognize you are a sinner in need of mercy, your perspective begins to change. You will become meek and gentle in your disposition. You hunger for what is right. As you receive God's mercy, you will give it out. You will become pure in heart, which means to be real; to be free from falsehood. Conflict usually arises out of falsehood and deceit. More than anything else, peacemaking requires that we die to ourselves. Jesus made peace through the cross; we make peace through dying as well, dying to self; taking up our cross daily.

There is another way we can be peacemakers. We can try to bring people together with God. The good news of the Gospel is that the hard work of making peace has already been done by God. He signed a peace treaty with the blood of his Son. All we have to do is sign that peace treaty by faith and there is no longer anything between God and us. Peacemakers will want to get that good news out to others. They will try to get others to sign on.

At the end of World War II, the United States signed a peace treaty with the Japanese, but in the South Pacific Islands, a number of Japanese soldiers didn't get the news. They kept fighting years after the war was over. In fact, it wasn't that long ago that the last of those soldiers was found! For years after the war, messengers went out to isolated islands to bear the good news about the peace treaty, but the soldiers shot at them. They wouldn't believe it, so they kept on fighting. Many people today are like that. They isolate themselves. They refuse to believe that the war between them and God is over; that God has done everything to make peace a reality. They keep on fighting him. Our job is to keep being those messengers. To risk being shot at and keep announcing the good news that they can come out of their hiding and live in peace with God. That's the greatest peace of all because it lasts forever.

We make peace by going out of our way to bring people together with God and with each other. Jesus says, in recognition of our work, God will give us new names - sons of God. He says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

IV. Why are peacemakers called sons of God?

Why are peacemakers called "sons of God?" Perhaps it's because God himself is called "the God of peace." In 2 Thess. 5: 13 Paul signs off by saying, "**Now may the Lord of peace continually grant you peace in every circumstance.**"

In Romans 15:33 he says, "**Now may the God of peace be with you all.**" In Philippians 4:9 he says, "**If you practice these things, the God of peace will be with you.**" Our God is the God of peace. When we know the God of peace we experience the peace of God.

But when we know the God of peace, we also become peacemakers. Sons are supposed to look like their fathers. When we make peace, we look a lot like God. The Bible has two words for "children." One of them, tekna, emphasizes the close relationship between God and his children. That's not the word Jesus uses here. The other word, huios, is usually translated "sons" and emphasizes a person's character. That is the word Jesus uses. This was a Hebrew way of speaking. Joseph was renamed Barnabas, which means "son of encouragement," because he was an encouraging person. Judas was called "the son of perdition." James and John were called "the sons of thunder." This says something about their character. So if someone is called a "son of God" or a "daughter of God" that person is displaying God's character. When we go out of our way to bring people together with God and with others we are doing the work of God and we look a lot like him.

CONCLUSION

Lee Strobal tells a story about a guy named Billy Moore who came to look a lot like God. Billy Moore grew up poor in a tough area. He got involved with crime when he was young. He and his buddies would smoke dope and get drunk and break into bars and steal from cash registers. Then he joined the army and got married. His wife left him and took their kid with her. He was broke and he was desperate.

One night he and friend were out smoking pot and talking about how broke they were. His friend said he knew a guy who lived near by who didn't trust banks, and kept all his money in his bedroom. Billy asked if he was a tough guy and discovered he was just an old man who couldn't hurt a fly.

So Billy went back to his barracks, loaded his gun, and drove to that man's house. He broke in and started ransacking the house looking for cash. When the old man heard Billy, he got scared. He went and got his hunting rifle and as Billy broke through his bedroom door he pointed it at Billy and pulled the trigger. The buckshot went right over Billy's head and missed him completely. Billy then took his own gun and shot the man twice. The man fell dead. Billy ran out of his house with \$5,600 and hid in his trailer in rural Georgia.

It didn't take long for the police to track Billy down. They took him jail and charged him with first degree murder. That first night in jail Billy knew his life was over. He knew an electric chair was waiting for him. But Billy's mother was a follower of Jesus Christ. She knew a Christian couple who lived close to the jail and she asked them to go visit him. They went to visit Billy and they told him, "Billy, Jesus can give you peace and a fresh start." Billy was dumbfounded. He said, "You have to be kidding. Don't you realize my situation here? I am being charged with a death penalty case. My life is over." But the man just said, "Billy, Jesus Christ loves you so much he died for you to make peace between you and God, and he wants to make your life count." Later, Billy said,

"Nobody ever spoke to me like that."

And so, right there in the jail cell, Billy Moore got down on his knees and accepted God's offer of peace. He said, "God, I'm sorry for all I've done. I want to live for you. If you want to take me to heaven soon that's okay with me. I don't have much time left, but if you could do something to make my life count, it would be the icing on the cake."

There was a bathtub on death row and they got permission to fill it up and baptize Billy right there. From that day on, God began to change Billy's life. He went to court and pleaded guilty. He said, "How can I tell you I didn't do it when I did?" They found him guilty and sentenced him to death. Billy sat on death row for 16 years, waiting for his day to arrive. During that time he grew in his walk with Christ. He was a model prisoner. He held Bible studies with other prisoners and one by one they found the same peace he had. Death row is an ugly, violent, hateful place, but while Billy was there the place became bright and hopeful. While he was there, they gave Billy a nickname. Billy Moore was known by all as "the peacemaker." He was a peacemaker because even on death row he had found peace with God, and just as someone had done with him, he went out of his way to bring people together with God and with each other.

But that's not the end of the story. In August, 1990, the court system finally caught up with Billy Moore. He was to die on August 22 and he was brought to the death watch cell. One of his lawyers said being with Billy during that time was the strangest experience. He said, "We were there to console him, but he was consoling us. He kept saying, 'I know this is hard for you. Can I pray for you?'" Right up to the final day, Billy was making peace.

On August 21, seven and one-half hours before he was to die, something unprecedented in American history took place. The Georgia Pardon and Parole Board held an emergency hearing about a peacemaking prisoner they had heard about. They even heard relatives of the man he had killed speak out on Billy's behalf. They did something so unbelievable that it made the front page of the New York Times. They pardoned Billy Moore. They saw that the work he was doing was the work of God, and they set him free to continue his ministry as a peacemaker. Today you could find Billy Moore where he is every Sunday - pastoring a church in rural Georgia.

When we experience peace with God we become peacemakers like Billy Moore. He makes our life count. We go out of our way to bring people together with God and with each other. When we do that, we look a lot like God.

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