

A Portable Peace

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An elementary art teacher once asked her class to draw pictures that would illustrate or portray the concepts of peace and tranquillity. The students for the most part predictably latched onto the typical or stereotypical scenes: blue skies, peaceful valleys with babbling brooks, forest meadows, backyard barbecues, or families playing or reclining on the beach.

The picture that caught the teacher's eye depicted a threatening, stormy sky with billowing clouds, ominous lightning strikes, trees bending in the gale-force winds and frothing white caps out on the water. Nestled in a secure crag, a mother bird placed her wings over her brood of hatchlings. In the teacher's mind, this scene captured the essence of peace, a secure peace in the midst of extreme adversity—a kind of "portable" peace. We could describe the kind of peace that the baby birds experienced as a singular undivided trust amidst unstable, inclement conditions.

Throughout the scriptures, Jesus and the apostles illustrated this peace in the face of danger. One remarkable example occurred during a raging, turbulent storm on the Sea of Galilee, threatening to capsize the boats. Meanwhile, the Prince of Peace slept in the stern of the boat unperturbed and tranquil (Matthew 8:24; Mark 4:38).

In another memorable account in Acts 12, on the night before his scheduled execution, Peter felt so much at peace, trusting in God's purpose for him, that an angel had to use considerable energy to rouse him from a deep sleep. This kind of peace really passes all understanding!

Spiritual Strobe Meter

Perhaps the overriding lesson of the book of James concerns the causes, sources, conditions and deterrents to peace. He suggests that single-mindedness—an undivided trust in God and His sovereignty—leads to peace, while double-mindedness—maintaining a split loyalty—leads to disharmony and strife.

A metaphor from acoustical physics and music describes these antagonistic conditions. Acoustical physics applies the term "harmonic" as an overtone with a frequency *equal to* the fundamental frequency multiplied by a whole number (*Barnes and Noble Thesaurus of Science*, p. 68). Because the harmonic overtones consist of multiples of the same frequency, they will never clash with the fundamental frequency. In music, harmonic intervals blend and complement, creating pleasing wholesome chords, while dissonant frequencies will clash, causing an unpleasant cacophony resonating at cross purposes with the fundamental or original frequency.

One high school band director tunes his band with the help of an electronic strobe meter. When the pitch vibrates at the proper frequency, a solid black bar emerges on the scope, but when the frequency moves slightly slower or faster than the pre-established frequency, jagged lines appear. The band director wants all the instruments on the same frequency when he asks for a concert A or B-flat.

"Harmony" and "concord" describe a state in which the frequencies do not clash with one another or move at cross purposes. Much of the enjoyment of music comes from the individual instruments adhering to overriding laws of harmony and complementarity. The book of James could be called a kind of spiritual strobe meter, keeping our spiritual instruments resonating in harmonic vibration to God's laws. James, at the outset, urges a sympathetic resonating frequency to God's Spirit, suggesting that a double-minded individual demonstrates instability in everything he thinks, says and does (James 1:8).

James detects clashing, inharmonic frequencies between faith and doubt, yielding to God's Spirit or to lust (James 1:13-14), hearing and doing (1:25), clashes between pure and hypocritical religion (1:26-27), treating rich and poor differently (2:3), faith and works (2:20), pure and unwholesome uses of the tongue (3:1-12), competition and envy contrasted with cooperation (4:2), friendship with the world contrasted with friendship with God (4:4), clashes between patience and rage (1:20; 5:7).

James realizes that maintaining a state of double-mindedness (spiritual dissonance or disharmony) comes from harboring two antithetical thoughts—ideas, desires, or behaviors that clash or run at cross purposes with another. Double-mindedness destroys peace and tranquillity.

Fruits of Double-Mindedness

People have often found themselves trapped in jobs or professions they loathed, but learned too late in life to make a course correction. Ulcers, hypertension, strokes and heart attacks may provide the grim icing on a lifetime of dissonance and disharmony between what they want to do and what they must do. Likewise, marital incompatibility destroys more than half of new marriages. A conciliation court judge recently confided to me the frustration and futility he faces in trying to put the pieces together.

As members of God's family, we have the responsibility to reestablish harmony and concord in our lives and with the people with which we associate. "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus, "for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).

By submitting to God's direction and adjusting ourselves to his strobe meter, we receive peace of mind. James 4:8 says:

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

Peace and single-mindedness or steadfastness seem inextricably related. Isaiah 26:3 teaches us, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You." Focus upon God and His laws automatically lead us to peace. We become at one with God and at peace when we yield to and follow His laws. Psalm 119:165 concurs, "Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble." God's laws produce peace and tranquillity while disobedience automatically creates friction, tension, and dissonance.

Living at Peace With All

Sometimes law-abiding people become discouraged observing how people in high places from the President to the constable can treat God's law with impunity and get away with it. They wonder why

they should expend the extra effort getting in harmony with God's law while a neighbor, boss or public official does something unethical and appears to profit from it. Some wonder if they should not adopt a kind of situation ethics: one set of standards for church brethren and another for the world. Paul censured Peter for such a set of double standards (Galatians 2:11-21).

Single-minded adherence to God's standards should become a part of our character among family, friends, associates, strangers—and even around those who despise God's laws. Chances are excellent that they will not fault us for remaining ethical when they choose not to. Remember:

When a man's ways please the Lord [when he is in harmony with God's laws], He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him. (Proverbs 16:7)

The apostle Paul in Romans 12:18 admonishes us, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

We may find that easier said than done. The modern urban environment has spawned an insidious art form called "urban" or "gangster" rap in which lyrics couched in the most foul language promotes murder, torture, sex perversion, and destruction. Technology has provided super-amplified car stereos to blast this untreated filth and perversion right into our faces. As we look into the eyes of the addicts of this so-called "music," we see how the angry, pulsating lyrics have transformed these young people into sullen, truculent, defiant personalities, exuding hatred, rage, and anger wherever they go.

Truly, those of us who, because of our job commitments, find ourselves trapped in sprawling urban environments must aggressively apply Psalm 34:14: "Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it." Unfortunately, we have difficulty avoiding taking on the characteristics of the society in which we live. We can become transformed into frantic, stressful, anxious, highly irritable creatures.

We are forced to learn or adapt to a way of life contrary to the mind of God. Many of us endure the day-to-day combat of rush hour traffic. Tempers become short and behavior becomes childish. Road rage has quadrupled in the last ten years. One anthropologist, Edward Hall, in describing the pace and stress of New York City commuters during rush hour, exclaimed:

You know, I've been on commuter trains here after everyone has been through one of these rushes, and I'll tell you, there is enough acid in the stomachs in every car to dissolve the rails underneath.

Who knows what hydrochloric acid would do on cement and asphalt, but the freeways and expressways of Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and New York City would look like craters of the moon if it were poured on it.

Crowds Versus Space

God Almighty never intended that people crowd together in large urban pens. To the developers of high-rise condominiums and housing projects, jamming people together in stifling cubicles, the Almighty thunders:

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, till there is no place where they may dwell alone in the midst of the land! (Isaiah 5:8)

The resulting overcrowding has taken away our peace.

Writer Tom Wolfe in his article, "Oh Rotten Gotham" comments:

Overcrowding gets the adrenaline going, and the adrenaline gets them hyped up. And here they are, hyped up, turning bilious, nephritic, a queer, autistic, sadistic, barren, batty, hot-in-the-pants, chancered-on-the-flankers, leering, puling, numb—the usual in New York, in other words.

Peace requires enclaves of solitude, occasionally away from other people. Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ, who certainly found Himself as busy as any of us, who had been given the Holy Spirit without measure, realized the absolute need for solitude, meditation and renewal.

We find numerous instances throughout the gospels in which Jesus rose well before daylight and departed to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35; 6:46; John 8:1). Luke 22:39 suggests that Jesus enjoyed the Mount of Olives and hiked there frequently.

I grew up on a farm in southern Minnesota containing over a hundred acres of beautiful wooded land on the Minnesota River Valley and a spring bed lake on the other side. I did not fully appreciate these surroundings until I moved into the city.

Urban dwellers have to exercise more resourcefulness in finding such solitary places, but we cannot afford not to make the effort. Actually, each urban area contains a way of escape for those who make the effort. Los Angeles, for example, has the Angeles Crest National Forest and Vasquez County Park within an hour's drive, and New York City has the Catskill Mountains within driving distance.

Currently, my family lives near a university campus with lakes and a nature trail. These environs become deserted during the weekends when the students go home to party.

We should go back to nature periodically to get back in sync with God's timetable. We need to bring this serenity and tranquillity back with us, enabling us to become a source of refreshment to those we come in contact, serving as a kind of ambassador to those desperately thirsting for this peace.

We need to absorb the godly lessons from unspoiled nature. In this environment we can immediately sense the fruits of God's Spirit. For one thing, God's timetable seems more relaxed than the frantic, anxious, hurrying found in urban rush hours. The patience of God becomes evident in the care He puts in His creation.

Nature teaches us that God loves variety. We see thousands of flora and fauna projects all taking place at once, but in perfect harmony with one another. Creation teaches us cooperation rather than strife and competition. The manzanita does not exalt itself over the yucca, the cedar does not exalt itself over the chaparral, nor does the dogwood exalt itself over the magnolia. In nature we do not get a sense of have or have not.

Enclaves of Peace

Our everyday lives should serve as oases of God's Spirit to the people we encounter. It does not seem particularly strange to experience peace, tranquillity and gentleness in raw, unspoiled nature. People find it far more refreshing to see this same peace, patience and tranquillity in places that normally lack these characteristics.

Like the mother bird in the elementary classroom picture who carried a portable peace to her offspring, we should provide comfort and peace not only to our brethren, but to all we come in contact.

Then we can fully understand the words of our Elder Brother in Matthew 11:28, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," as well as the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 4:7, "and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."