

The Beatitudes, Part 7: Blessed Are The Peacemakers

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We live in a world torn by animosities. Even a cursory survey of the past century's events causes us to wonder if mankind has ever had more need of peacemakers. Americans have fought two World Wars as well as major conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Currently, wars of varying degrees of intensity blaze in Yugoslavia, Angola, Sudan, Afghanistan and Rwanda. In addition, the Arab-Israeli conflict always simmers just below the surface, like the long-running feud between India and Pakistan. Tibet is subject to China, and the two Chinas, like North and South Korea, have chilly relationships. Numerous countries fight political and economic problems. Certain racial and ethnic groups charge bias against others. In short, much of the world seems to reside in a boiling pot about to spill its contents over its sides and into the fire.

Governments send their emissaries in attempts to avoid all-out war, but they never seem able to accomplish anything except short-lived, surface tranquillity that only allows the parties to gear themselves up for the next round of hostilities. Some of these antagonisms have simmered and flared for centuries—one has its roots in discord existing for millennia! Based on human history, everyone can reasonably conclude that the business of peacemaking has generally been an abject failure, though interspersed with some moderate, brief successes in bringing the worst of the hostilities to a halt for a while.

This does not detract from the beatitude, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9), because Jesus states this from God's perspective. Tragically, the world has usually reserved its highest honors for the war-makers. But if God says peacemakers are blessed, who can truthfully argue against His conclusion?

The above overview clearly shows how difficult a peacemaker's task is, regardless of the scope of the dispute he is attempting to resolve. Peacemaking aims to reconcile groups or individuals at odds. The difficulties in this are threefold:

- » First, keeping one's biases from unduly influencing the tenor of the arguments.
- » Second, finding common ground from which agreement can be built. This can be troublesome because some people are highly competitive, contentious, stubborn and driven to "win" regardless of the cost. Some will pull everybody else down with them just so they do not appear to "lose."
- » Third, finding ways to change the views of those at odds to effect a change of position.

Getting people to take a different view of a problem and change their minds about how a conflict should be resolved can be arduous and emotionally draining. Proverbs 26:17 gives some keen insight into this, "He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears." This strongly indicates that peacemaking may be a painful endeavor.

A Christian Vocation

We must always remember that in the Beatitudes Jesus describes characteristics of those who will be in His Kingdom. Peacemaking qualifies as a characteristic each son of God will exhibit. James 3:16-18 adds:

For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil work will be there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

"Wisdom" in the Bible has the same general meaning as the English word "skill." In this context, "wisdom" indicates proficiency, competence or adeptness at living in such a way to produce the fruits of righteousness. Notice that this wisdom from above that reflects itself in the conduct of God's children is first pure. It is uncontaminated by any of the myriad aspects of carnal, self-centered human nature. It is not peace sought at the expense of righteousness. Hebrews 12:14 clearly says we are to "pursue peace with all men, *and* holiness." It is not either/or; it is both. We all need to avoid needless contentions, yet not to the point of sacrificing the truth, compromising principle or forsaking duty.

This wisdom is also peaceable and, unlike the attitude of the highly competitive, willing to yield. That is, it is not irascible, contentious, angry or bigoted—driving the wedges of separation deeper—but rather calming, gentle and tranquil. The heavenly wisdom will accomplish this through a person, not because he is necessarily mediating, but simply because he is projecting the nature of God.

If we are indeed regenerated by God's Spirit, being at peace and making peace will be the rule in our lives. As to the actual mechanisms that we can use to make peace, room for some differences of opinion certainly exists. There can be no dispute, however, that the vocation of every Christian is to make peace primarily through what he himself is. Secondly, we must strive to secure the conditions and relationships that will make good will, concord and cooperation possible instead of hatred, strife, competition and conflict.

Pursuing Peace

Paul gives more advice on this subject in Romans 14:19: "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." This seems so obvious that it need not be said, but God includes it in His Word because Christians within the church do not hold in check some of the very things that cause so much disunity in this world. The apostle entreats us to lay aside the causes of contention so we can live in harmony.

Sometimes we do not understand how competitive human nature is. It is proud. It feels it has to win, be vindicated, and if possible, elevated over others. These attitudes do not make peace. Rather than pursuing the things that cause contention, Paul says, pursue the things that cause peace. It is a Christian's responsibility, part of his vocation. Emphasizing the positive is an incomplete, but nonetheless fairly accurate, description of what can be done.

Solomon writes in Proverbs 13:10, "By pride comes only contention, but with the well-advised is wisdom." Contention divides. Much of the strife and disunity in the church is promoted by those who seem bent on "majoring in the minors." This is the overall subject of Romans 14. Church members were becoming "bent out of shape" over things that irritated them but had little or nothing to do with

salvation. They blew these irritants out of proportion to their real importance, creating disruption in the congregation.

Essentially, Paul tells these people to change their focus, to turn the direction of their thinking, because we agree on far more of real, major importance to salvation than what we disagree on. If we will cooperate on these major things rather than on private ends and prejudices, peace and unity will tend to emerge rather than strife and disunity. Paul further admonishes the irritated members to have faith in God's power to change the other: "Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand" (Romans 14:4).

Why can we not cultivate a spirit of peace by striving for holiness? Holiness is a major issue leading to preparation for God's Kingdom and salvation. Peace is one of its fruits. Why can we not show love for the brethren and strive to do good for them "as we have opportunity, . . . especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10)? Why can we not spend more serious time studying God's Word getting to know Him? These admirable pursuits are humbling and serving. They produce peace and put other, less important matters into a proper perspective and priority. If pursued sincerely, they keep the "minors" right where they belong because they tend to erode one's pride.

In Romans 10:15, Paul focuses our attention on part of the gospel's intention. He quotes Isaiah, writing: "And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!'" The gospel to which God converts us contains good news of peace, and Isaiah describes the feet of the bearers of this message to the troubled as "beautiful."

"Peace" signifies any kind of good produced by the gospel. It is the good news of reconciliation and the end of the conflicts, distresses and woes of our warfare. No wonder the means of locomotion to get this message to distressed and anxiety-ridden people—by foot, as it was delivered in Isaiah's time—is described as beautiful! Of course, this does not mean conflict and trouble immediately end. The gospel is prophetic, and salvation in its broad terms is an unfolding process. Peace describes the benefits that come when we cease to be an enemy of God, since, until that happens, peace is not a major part of our lives. It should be and will be, and we are preparing to be part of bringing it in its fullness (Isaiah 9:7).

Peace With God Comes First

Paul plainly states in II Corinthians 5:18-21:

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us; we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

We play a part in making peace with God by choosing to be reconciled to Him. This is perhaps the first step in becoming a peacemaker.

Paul essentially refers to himself as the one to whom the word and ministry of reconciliation have been given as a portion of his function as an apostle of Jesus Christ. However, the thought does not end there because we are also being prepared to assist in causing the reconciliation of the world to God. This is a second major, time-consuming step toward being a peacemaker. The sanctification process of a Christian's conversion creates within us the ability to be a peacemaker in the godly mold.

The church is a spiritual body, the body of Jesus Christ. It is an assembly of people called to prepare for God's Kingdom and participate in and support the church's work in feeding the flock and preaching the gospel to the world. The church has two primary duties: 1) to provide a means of calling others to reconciliation and peace with God, and 2) to provide the full counsel of God to help the called know God and become holy. This is the vocation, the work, of all Christians under God.

In this church age, sanctification is the process by which an individual's peace with God reaches beyond a legal technicality (as occurs at justification) to be inculcated into the person's character. In God's paradigm, a person cannot really make peace unless he is first at peace with God. "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7). Describing unconverted mankind, Paul says, "The way of peace they have not known" (Romans 3:17; Isaiah 59:8). Until ongoing conversion dissolves that enmity and peace is thoroughly established in a person's character, we cannot truly be instruments of godly peace.

Paul can thus write in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Here, peace undoubtedly means a cessation of hostilities, a tranquillity of mind, where formerly a state of almost continual agitation had existed because of the carnal mind's innate hostility toward God and His law. These last several verses take note of the horrible contention and enmity that sin causes, for where there is no strife, there is no need for a peacemaker. All of us, however, were at war with God; Titus 3:3 catches all of us within its scope: "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another." Before conversion, we each needed a peacemaker to mediate and make reconciliation for us.

What is missing from verses like Titus 3:3 is that they do not show how tenaciously human nature clings to our attitudes and behavior, providing a constant challenge to maintaining peace with God and others. Paul vividly describes his battle with it in Roman 7, and numerous other exhortations encourage us to employ self-control and love for God and the brethren. This leads us to understand that peacemaking involves more than mediating between disputing parties. Peacemaking is a constant responsibility. Its achievement is possible but more difficult than it first seems because many factors—both from within and without—challenge us in maintaining it.

Except for verses like Romans 5:1 and other specific contexts, biblical peace is much broader. Jesus, of the tribe of Judah, spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages common to those He taught. The Hebrew and Aramaic word for "peace," *shalom*, perhaps best describes this peace. The word forms a portion of Jerusalem, "city of peace"—something that it is not at this time.

Shalom and Peacemaking

William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible Series* gives this understanding of *shalom*:

In Hebrew *peace* is never only a negative state; it never means only the absence of trouble; in Hebrew *peace* always means *everything which makes for a man's highest*

good. In the east when one man says to another, *Salaam*—which is the same word—he does not mean that he wishes for the other man only the absence of evil things; he wishes for him the presence of all good things. In the Bible peace means not only freedom from all trouble; it means enjoyment of all good. (vol. 1, p. 108)

This definition begins to give us insight why peacemaking, just as with all the other characteristics expressed in the Beatitudes, is such a high, demanding standard. Peacemaking is a more encompassing term than it appears. Since it means "everything which makes for a man's highest good," it is another, more specific term for love. Loving under every circumstance is not easy.

At first glance, there seems to be a number of contradictions regarding peace, peacemaking and the Christian. Most commentators write only narrowly on peacemaking, approaching it almost entirely in regard to mediating between disputing people. Good as far as it goes, this is inadequate in describing what the beatitude means.

Jesus was a peacemaker; in Isaiah 9:6, He is titled "Prince of Peace." Here, however, an apparent contradiction appears. We might think that if anyone could successfully mediate between warring parties, He could. If anyone could bring peace, perhaps even impose it, He could. But He did not. In fact, He says in Matthew 10:34-36, quoting Micah 7:6:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to "set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And "a man's foes will be those of his own household."

Nonetheless, Jesus is still our model; His life is the pattern ours should follow. Paul writes in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." Undoubtedly, Jesus did this, but *it did not produce peace at that time*. Some perceived His life, popularity and words as so threatening that they put Him to death. Some were moved to jealousy while others, enraged, incited the populace against Him to sway Pilate's judgment. His life, death and resurrection, however, enabled Him to be the instrument of our peace with God and each other by qualifying Him as the payment for sin and High Priest to mediate for us before the Father.

The following verses add several necessary elements:

- » **I John 2:2**: And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.
- » **Romans 3:25-26**: [Jesus,] whom God set forth to be a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
- » **Hebrews 5:9-10**: And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek."
- » **Ephesians 2:14-18**: For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile

them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.
And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.
For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

As a human, Jesus of Nazareth certainly had more success mediating between disputing parties than we ever will under similar circumstances. Even though His life created conflict and hostility in others, it did not stop Him from living the life of a peacemaker so that He could become a real Peacemaker upon His resurrection as Savior and High Priest. The life He lived as a man cannot be separated from what He became. It is the model of the kind of peacemaking Jesus intends in the Beatitude.

Peacemaking involves not only mediating but also everything the person is, his attitude and character as well as what he intends to accomplish. Peacemaking is a package dominated by the godliness of the person. Thus, Paul says in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, *you who are spiritual* restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

Peacemaking Through Living

Most of us are not at all adept at reconciling warring parties, but that is not the kind of peacemaking Jesus is concerned about for us now. His idea of peacemaking revolves around the way we live. It was Adam and Eve's *conduct* that shattered the peace between man and God. Cain's *conduct* broke the peace between him and Abel and him and God. As it is with all of us, conduct makes or breaks the peace!

As mentioned earlier, Paul commands us, "As much *as depends on you*, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18), an arduous task at times, considering human personalities. The thrust of Paul's exhortation implies that, far from being a simple task, complying with it will call upon our constant vigilance, self-control and earnest prayer.

Though human nature guarantees that peace-breaking "offenses must come," it is part of Christian duty to ensure that our conduct produces no just cause of complaint against us (Matthew 18:7). It is first for our own peace that we do so, for it is impossible to be happy while involved in arguments and warfare. Some Christians are more competitive and contentious than others, and they need to beg God doubly for the spiritual strength to restrain their pride and anger and to calm them. Paul warns, "'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26). Though pride may be at the base of contention, rising anger within one or the other person in a dispute is frequently the first sign that the peace is about to be broken. Paul's warning is necessary because anger is so difficult to check and equally difficult to let go completely before the peace is broken, and bitter and persistent hatred soon replaces the anger.

Paul quotes the first phrase of this verse from Psalm 4:4, then modifies the second phrase to give it a more immediate and practical application. "Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still. Selah. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and put your trust in the Lord" (Psalm 4:4-5). This is exactly the course Jesus follows when taunted and vilified by those whose ire He had aroused. Notice Peter's testimony:

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His

mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously. (I Peter 2:21-23)

If we follow Christ's example, the one reviling or threatening soon finds himself without an opponent. God, then, advises us to be passive in the face of contention. In the Kingdom, however, we will likely be a great deal more proactive, just as Christ is now as our High Priest. He will be even more active when He comes as King of kings to fight against the nations and establish His peace.

Since it is true that "blessed are the peacemakers," it logically follows that God curses peace-breakers, a fact all who desire to be peacemakers must keep in mind. Contention produces the curse of disunity. When Adam and Eve sinned, both unity and peace were shattered, and God sentenced them to death. Regardless of the justification, it is impossible for sin to produce either godly peace or unity. It is therefore urgent that we be diligent not merely to guard against the more obvious forms of sin but also bigotry, intemperate zeal, judging, impatience and a quarrelsome spirit, which provide a basis for Paul's counsel in Romans 14.

This leads directly into Paul's advice to the Ephesian church:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Notice carefully what Paul names as the reason for making unity and peace: the value we place on our calling. If, in our heart of hearts, we consider it of small value, our conduct, especially toward our brethren, will reveal it and work to produce contention and disunity. Thus John writes, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (I John 4:20).

Paul next counsels us to choose to conduct ourselves humbly. Humility is pride's opposite. If pride only produces contention, it follows that humility will work to soothe, calm, heal and unify. He advises us to cultivate meekness or gentleness, the opposite of the self-assertiveness that our contemporary culture promotes so strongly. Self-assertiveness is competitive determination to press one's will at all costs. This approach may indeed "win" battles over other brethren, but it might be helpful to remember God's counsel in Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." James declares that godly wisdom is "gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy" (James 3:17).

Then Paul counsels that we be patient; likewise, James counsels us to "let patience have its perfect work" (James 1:4). We often want quick resolutions to the irritations between us, which is certainly understandable since we want to get rid of the burden those differences impose. But we must understand that speedy solutions are not always possible. Interestingly, in Paul's letter to the Philippians, he does not use his apostolic authority to drive the two feuding women into a forced solution (Philippians 4:1). Some problems are deeply buried within both sides of the contention, so finally Paul admonishes us to forbear with each other in love. Essentially, he says to "put up with it" or endure it, doing nothing to bring the other party down in the eyes of others and vainly elevate the self. This is peacemaking through living by godly character.

Yet another aspect to the Christian duty of peacemaking is our privilege by prayer to invoke God's mercy upon the world, the church and individuals we know are having difficulties or whom we perceive God may be punishing. This is one of the sacrifices of righteousness mentioned briefly earlier in relation to Psalm 4:4. The Bible provides many examples of godly people doing this. Abraham prayed for Sodom, Gomorrah and probably Lot too, when the division between them and God was so great that He had to destroy the cities (Genesis 18:16-33). Moses interceded for Israel before God following the Golden Calf incident (Exodus 33:11-14). Aaron ran through the camp of Israel with a smoking censer (a symbol of the prayers of the saints) following another of Israel's rebellions that greatly disturbed the peace between them and God (Numbers 16:44-50). In each case God relented to some degree. We will probably never know in this life how much our prayers affect the course of division or how much others—even the wicked—gained as a result of our intercession, but we should find comfort knowing that we have done at least this much toward making peace.

The Reward of Peacemaking

Jesus says that peacemakers "shall be called sons of God." Once we understand the Bible's usage of the words "sons" and "children," we can easily see that this beatitude does not apply to worldly people. Both "sons" and "children" not only describe those who are literal descendents, but also those who show the characteristics of a predecessor who is not necessarily a biological ancestor. For instance, in John 8:38, 41, 44, Jesus tells the Jews that Satan is their father. Their attitudes and conduct revealed who their true spiritual father was; they were in Satan's image. Those who fit the Matthew 5:9 description of godly peacemakers reveal that they are in the image and likeness of God!

As Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace, God is called the God of peace (Hebrews 13:20). When we add the thought of Hebrews 2:11, interesting ramifications concerning us surface: "For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are *all of one*, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren." If indeed we are His children and therefore united in the spiritual body of Christ, we will show the same peaceable disposition of the One who is the Head. Thus He has no shame in calling us brethren. Through us, His characteristics are being manifested to the church and to the world.

Peacemaking is more complex and involved than it first appears because it entails the way we live all of life. This produces peace both passively and actively: passively, because we are not a cause of disruption, and actively, because we create peace by drawing others to emulate our example and by them seeking for the tranquillity and pleasure we have as a result. Though a Christian has little or no control over others in mediating peace between disputing parties, this should not deter him from living the peacemaking way. It is the way a person lives that will prepare him to be a much more active and authoritative peacemaker in the World Tomorrow when Christ returns. Peacemaking is indeed a high standard and a worthy vocation, yielding a wonderful reward that is worth bending our every effort to submit to God and seek His glorification.