



A Life That We Can Live

Imitating Christ

A Life of Peace

“God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called children of God”

– Jesus (Matt 5:9 NLT)

Followers of Jesus strive to make peace wherever they are. Jesus called all of his followers to be peacemakers, and he set the ultimate example through his own life. Becoming like him and manifesting peace ourselves toward others (and our self and God’s creation) is our goal, and it starts by contemplating peace and letting it into our heart, as well as recognizing and working to redeem the very things that threaten and oppose it.

We have to acknowledge that there are powers at work in the world that are trying to divide and destroy us and the abundant life that Jesus offers (John 10:10). Even today, the things that are happening are not necessarily new. They’re things that have played out repeatedly throughout history in a cyclical fashion. But what can happen to us as the people of God in the midst of these kinds of situations is that we lose sight of who we are and why we’re here as God’s people. It’s important for us as kingdom people to remember our identity and purpose — to ask ourselves: Who are we? Why are we here? And how can we be different in the midst of the things that cause division and violence? How can we be known as a people of peace?

To answer this question, we begin by looking at Jeremiah 29:7: ***“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”***

Jeremiah was one of the major prophets in the Old Testament. He was an Israelite. His hometown was Jerusalem. And he had been calling his people for years to stay faithful to God and not be pulled away by the ways of the world. They didn’t listen to him, and eventually the great empire of Babylon attacks and destroys Jerusalem and takes many of the people into exile in Babylon.

Jeremiah is among the people who are left behind in Jerusalem, but he knows of many who are now exiled in Babylon. Some were holding out hope of returning one day to Jerusalem, while others were losing sight of returning home and tempted to go with the flow of Babylon. Through Jeremiah, God speaks to this exiled group, reminding them that they will be there for some time. They should put their roots down and multiply. And as this happens, they are called to seek the peace and prosperity of the city and to pray to God on its behalf.

The Hebrew word translated as “peace and prosperity” in Jeremiah 29:7 is *shalom*. The word *shalom* is often times interpreted as “peace,” and yet this word also means so much more than what we think of as peace. ***Shalom* is a powerful word that includes “wholeness” and “flourishing” and “mutual unity, harmony, and well-being” where everything is as God intended.** And Jeremiah is writing to the people of God, calling them to seek *shalom* for the city in which they live.

To “seek” is also an important word here. To “seek” *shalom* is not something that happens only in our hearts or minds. **The Hebrew roots for the word “seek” carry the idea of walking a path — of repeatedly, patiently, and persistently following it — and over time, this pathway is etched into the earth.** To “seek” is to make something a way of life, pursuing it patiently over time, so that little by little there’s a pathway that’s visible, others can follow it, and it actually changes the very landscape of the earth.

Through Jeremiah, God calls the people of God to be *the people of God* in the midst of the broader world, because God loves the world. It wasn’t that God only cared for the Hebrews in Babylon. God cared about the whole world. And that’s why God called them to work for the peace and prosperity—the *shalom*—of that city. They were the people through whom peace could come because they serve a God who *is* peace. To be sure, their response to this would not change the world overnight or instantly make things better, but as they followed this path day by day, they could actually change the landscape of the world around them.

Jesus talked about this kind of slow, small, yet significant path of life in his teachings and parables. He talked his kingdom being like a pinch of leaven, where a little bit of leaven permeates a lump of dough (Matt 13:33). It doesn’t look like it’s doing much at first, but over time it has a powerful impact. He also talked about a mustard seed, a small thing that over time becomes a very big thing and brings a blessing to the people around it.

This speaks to the life of peace that Jesus modeled for us and calls us to continue. Jesus came to bring harmony and wholeness to this world. But he did not just bring it about — he is peace. *Shalom* is his character. The way of life for the people of God can be like this today, where we are walking the way of *shalom* patiently in everyday situations and encounters, inviting the world to see what God is like through the way we live.

The Peace of Christ¹

We sometimes think that peace is a little more than the absence of conflict, or the thing that happens when we leave each other alone, tolerate our divisions, or simply let things be. But the peace that comes from Christ is far richer and much more challenging.

The New Testament presents the peace of Christ as God’s ongoing work to overcome all the hostility, conflict, and divisions that set us against one another. Christ’s peace is a peace that heals, a peace that overcomes barriers, and a peace that creates community where community was never thought possible. Christ’s peace characterizes relationships and communities where people flourish together not because they always get along, but because they refuse to let hurts, disagreements, and divisions abide.

¹ This section is adapted from Paul Wadell’s discussion of peace in his book, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, pp. 90-96

In Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes, in his welcoming outreach to women and children, Jesus worked to create a new and unified humanity, a community to which everyone could belong, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free (Gal 3:28). In Christ not only do those old divisions no longer matter, they are absolutely overcome because they frustrate God's desire that human beings grow and flourish together. "It was characteristic of Jesus that he constantly *established community*," Gerhard Lohfink writes. "Jesus made clear through his word and even more through his concrete conduct that he did not recognize religious-social exclusion and discrimination."

Jesus' embodiment of peace was both the spark and sustenance of community, not only during his ministry but also years later within the church. Consider the passage in Ephesians where Paul celebrates how Gentiles and Jews, assumed to be permanently divided from one another, were made one through the reconciling work of Christ. Gentiles were considered the true outsiders, the absolutely excluded ones who could not be part of the people of God. As Paul says about the Gentiles, at one time you were "strangers to the covenant of promise, without hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:12).

It was the reconciling peace of Christ that overcame this divide. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus all division and exclusion were done away with so that those "who once were far off" were not part of the people of God (2:13). Speaking to the Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul says Christ "made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh...that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it" (2:14-17). In the peace of Christ, there are "no longer strangers and sojourners" because all are "fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God" (2:19).

Imitating Christ: Practices of Peace²

"Blessed are the peacemakers," Jesus said, but from the earliest days there were disputes and divisions, hurtful words and harmful deeds among his disciples. Peacemaking had to be practiced one step at a time, whether on a personal, communal, or global level. Peace was also Jesus' gift to his disciples (John 14:27), but that gift would live only if those trying to tell his story actively cultivated the attitudes and practices that make for peace. Christ's peace was to reign in their hearts (Col 3:15), but if that peace was to flourish among them and characterize their relationship with the world, their life together had to be guided by certain commitments.

End the Cycle of Violence and Retaliation (Matthew 5:38-48)

First, they had to reject violence and revenge as strategies for justice because both are starkly incompatible with the teaching and example of Jesus. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares peacemakers to be the true children of God (Matt 5:9). He instructs his followers to surpass the traditional law of retaliation ("an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth") with the command to "offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well" (Matt 5:39). Further, they are to love their enemies and persecutors instead of seeking revenge against them (Matt 5:44).

Jesus also modeled this practice of peace. Throughout his life he loved his enemies and turned the other cheek. When he stopped her accusers from stoning the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7), and when, on the night before he died, he told Peter to put away his sword (Matt 26:52), Jesus marked out the path of nonviolence. He walked that path to the cross, where he became our peace that we now offer to the world.

² Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life*, pp. 90-96

The purpose of Jesus' teaching is not to create an idealistic world, but a reconciled and redeemed world where people, instead of diminishing one another, help bring one another to life. As long as the necessity of retaliation is assumed, nothing really changes. This is why followers of Jesus submit to a way of life through which we are pried away from practices of violence and learn instead to embrace practices of peace. As Richard Hays puts it, "Instead of wielding the power of violence, the community of Jesus' disciples is to be meek, merciful, pure, devoted to peacemaking, and willing to suffer persecution—and blessed precisely in its faithfulness to this paradoxical vision."

Practice Patience, Listening, and Understanding (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Second, living according to the peace of Christ requires a commitment to patience. Patience may not be a popular virtue, and it certainly is not easily acquired, but there is no way that human beings can live together in peace without becoming skilled in patience. In fact, peace is the handiwork of patience because without patience all the things that threaten peace ultimately destroy peace.

Patience means "to suffer" or "to endure," and it is the shape love must take when we are confronted with challenging, unpleasant, or frustrating individuals or situations, all of which wear us down and none of which can be easily changed. Patience is steadfast love because with this virtue, instead of giving up on a spouse, son or daughter, a friend or a community, or even an enemy, we bear with them, work through difficulties along with them, and sometimes suffer on account of them.

Patience is the willingness to listen to the views of those with whom we disagree. To be peacemakers, we need to listen and understand. This doesn't mean we must agree with another's position; rather, we respect another person's right to have a different perspective. We can't listen if we're constantly trying to be right and put together what we're going to say next in the conflict. Patience demands that we "learn to yield" to another inasmuch as we do not "insist that we are always right" and admit that we have often been wrong.

Jesus modeled peace by creating community through patience and understanding. He didn't always agree with the people around him, but he listened to them and understood how their experiences brought them their current state in life. And through his love he helped bring them into a new life. **Jesus also modeled a way for his disciples to live out this difference in the middle of first century division.** Not only did he befriend and minister to people from every aspect of life, but he also gathered people together who represented the polar opposites of the political spectrum. Matthew was a tax collector who colluded with the Roman government, and Simon the Zealot had been part of a group who typically tried to kill people like Matthew.

In each of these examples, it was the teaching, vision, and example of Jesus that held them together and carved out a path forward. We are called to continue that life today. Patience, listening, and understanding are essential for living together in the peace of Christ. Christians, like everybody else, are no strangers to conflicts, divisions, and misunderstandings. But if we are faithful to the story of Jesus, we will work to overcome these things rather than allow them to prevail. Patience may be difficult to acquire, but without it we can lose the things we love most, whether a spouse, a friend, or a community, and know enmity far more than we know peace.

Forgive One Another (Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 23:34; Colossians 3:13)

Finally, if living in the Christian story entails walking in the way of Christ's peace, this cannot be done without people willing to forgive one another. Living the peace of Christ is far more than an interior quality of soul—it constitutes a whole way of life that must be worked at and attended to if it is not to be undermined by all that works against it.

We are often more skilled at nursing hurts than offering forgiveness, more skilled at plotting revenge than risking reconciliation. And many of us believe when we have been hurt by another that the only way to restore the balance is by hurting them in return. But where does it stop? And where does it take us?

The only way to change this pattern is for people to be willing to turn their energies from the power to destroy to the power to build up. This is what forgiveness does. It insists that there is a love powerful enough to overcome our hurts and divisions if we open ourselves to receive it and commit ourselves to practicing it.

Instead of trying to avenge ourselves, Jesus says to create peace through forgiveness and humility. When we do this, we exhibit the child-like faith that God longs to see in us.

Three Small Commitments

Christ's peace is a peace that heals, a peace that overcomes barriers, and a peace that creates community where community was never thought possible. And our participation in it begins with three small, yet significant commitments.

First, grow in self-awareness. What are the walls around you? What are the walls you create? What are the things you watch or listen to that may reinforce these walls?

Second, acknowledge your need for others. We cannot tear down walls alone. We need one another. We need community. The foot is as much of the body as the hand. We need one another to work together as the body. When we are a community of peace—a people who live in right relationship with one another through patience and forgiveness, a people of mutual respect and dignity among each other—that spills out into the world so that others can see who God is and what God is like through the way that we live.

Third, listen with patience and move forward in hope. With the many walls of division and amounts of conflict it's easy to lose hope. But chose instead to listen and understood, to be patient with those whom we disagree, and to move forward in hope. Trust that as you follow the path of Christ's peace day by day in your own situations and encounters, you're slowly but surely changing the landscape of the world around you.

Discussion

1. What comes to mind when you hear the word "peace"? How does the Hebrew word *shalom* expand your understanding of peace?
2. What are walls to peace around you currently and why do they exist?
3. Do you think Jesus, in his call to renounce retaliation and violence, asks too much of us? Why or why not? Is it possible to follow his "way of peace" in the world today?
4. *Daily acts of peacemaking are like a pinch of yeast in a bowl of flour; it has the power to leaven the whole batch. Three such small acts flow from our words and our reactions: not retaliating when we are provoked, not saying something that might damage a relationship, and forgiving when we are wronged.* Add to this list your own examples of small acts and choices that proved to have the power of the "yeast" of peacemaking.
5. This week, what is one concrete way that you can pursue the peace and prosperity of our city and especially of those closest to you?