

THE LIFE OF FORGIVENESS: PURSUE PEACE (PART 1)

Several months ago we went through a series of sermons dealing with forgiveness. Because of the importance of the issue and how it touches our lives practically on a daily basis, I have decided to put them in print so that we may all have a greater opportunity to read through and think about these issue afresh. This series arose out of study of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew; primarily in chapter 18 but also with reference to what Jesus said about forgiveness both within and immediately following the Lord's Prayer in chapter 6. Jesus' words in Matthew 18 emphasize two different ways to deal with offenses. First, Jesus exhorts his disciples to avoid offenses as much as possible. But since we don't live in ideal world we know that offenses will come. Jesus tells us this also in Matthew 18. Consequently, we also need to learn how to deal with offenses when they do cause a breach in our relationships.

These first two articles will deal with the first aspect of Jesus' words: avoiding offenses; or, to put it more positively, pursuing peace. Pursuing peace is the preemptive strike against sin destroying our relationships. These are preventative measures being taken so that we are not only thinking in terms of restoring that which is broken down, but maintaining relationships. Don't get me wrong, forgiveness maintains relationships. But it does so after sin has occurred. Sins will continue to happen. But we need to think about taking preventative measures against sin by pursuing peace in our relationships. *Christians must take a proactive approach to their relationships and seek and pursue peace, making every effort to avoid sinning against one another.*

In Romans 12 Paul tells us twice to seek peace. We are to be "of the same mind with one another" (12.16) and, as much as we are able, we are to live at peace with all men (12.18). Also, in Psalm 34 we hear these words: "Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of YHWH. Who *is* the man *who* desires life, And loves *many* days, that he may see good? Keep your tongue from evil, And your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil and do good; *Seek peace and pursue it.*" Peter reiterates this as he essentially quotes this in first epistle (1Pt 3.10-11) speaking to God's people scattered abroad. Peace is something to be actively sought after and pursued. It is not something that simply happens. It involves reconciling broken relationships, but it can also involve living in such ways so as to minimize the breaches. How we do this is the emphasis of this article. The ways in which we pursue peace and the characteristics of those who do this are scattered throughout the Bible. So, I will be drawing upon many texts as we go through this study.

As we will discover in later articles concerning forgiveness, we will learn that the goal of forgiveness is the restoration or reconciliation of the relationship. As Gregory Jones says in his book *Embodying Forgiveness*, "the purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness." (5) Peace is what God intends in our relationships. The peace that God intends in our relationships is much deeper than merely the cessation of conflict. Certainly there is no peace if there is conflict, but there can be the cessation of conflict and not be the peace that God intends. Biblical peace speaks of a relationship being whole. Things are as they should be in every respect. It is not simply the negative—i.e. the absence of conflict—but the positive—genuine love for one another with each person fulfilling his responsibility to the other(s).

We learn this from relationships within God himself. God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are three Persons in our one God who exist eternally in unbroken, unhindered communion with one another. Their relationship is whole. It is characterized by

peace. We being created in the image of God are intended to reflect these relationships of peace. This is especially true of those who bear the name in baptism of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we have become members of his family through Christ, we have a calling to act like the family. That responsibility includes pursuing this peace. Sin certainly disrupts this relationship between us and God and between each other. That is where forgiveness must be pursued. But the greater goal is peace; that wholeness of loving relationship that characterizes God himself.

Forgiveness is not the end game. We want peace. Sin and the forgiveness of it, therefore, should not be the only thing we focus upon. We need to understand and learn how to live in these relationships of peace. If we only learn to forgive, it will be like a man who catches a skunk by the back legs without being sprayed: it is a great achievement, but what do you do now?

One thing about peace that is assumed is an individual's relationship to a larger community. Forgiveness and peace assume that you are relating to other people. This is not merely a privatized experience. Certainly individuals may have internal peace; a sense of wholeness of soul and the joy that springs from it. There is nothing wrong with that. But we are created to live with others in communions of peace. So, this is not just about clearing our consciences or having a sense of resolution for our own minds. This is about making relationships right and maintaining right relationships.

Before I begin giving you the principles of pursuing peace and forgiveness, I want you to understand that these are *principles* and matters of wisdom. These are not hard-and-fast methods where you simply plug in a formula to a situation and out comes the peace you were looking for. These principles will call you to be wise in your applications. Making inflexible rules or hard-and-fast methods does not take into account different people, situations, and such the like that all have particularities that must be considered. This doesn't mean that we can "caveat this away" to the point that we turn the command to pursue peace or forgive our brother on its head and not do these things b/c we have made all sorts of justifications as to why it is not "prudent." My point is that people are not machines and should not be treated as such. Not every situation will be black-and-white. We must learn to live with people as people. We are complex creatures who are ever changing within ourselves and in relationships with others. Different situations arise that change us. New relationships change us. We change.

One thing this means is that all of this will be *work*. You cannot check your brain at the door, and you cannot expect that people will simply respond like a vending machine when you put in your "pursue peace" or "forgiveness" currency. Godly living is not for the lazy. God will present us with many opportunities to manage situations so that we learn how to be good kings and queens in his kingdom.

So, you will not have hard-and-fast rules. Rather it will take wisdom in applying the right word at the right time. Some words and actions that are appropriate to one situation and person may not be appropriate to another situation or person. Words and actions need to "fit" the situation (cf. Prov 15.23; 25.11). Solomon in Proverbs gives us what seems to be contradictory instructions when he says, "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, Lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes." (Prov 26.4-5). There is a time that you do not answer a fool according to his folly. But there is also a time when you do answer a fool according to his folly. It all depends on the person and the situation. You, as a wise king or queen in God's kingdom are to be discerning and figure that out. So it is with pursuing peace. What might be the right thing to do in one situation with a particular person might actually be problematic and counter-productive with another person in another situation. If you are thinking, "Once we are through with this I will have a template to apply to every situation in life so that I don't have to think about how to do it anymore," you will be sadly

disappointed. I will not be giving you all the answers. I will be giving you tools for your craft. You need to figure out when to use what tool and where. I will be giving you principled approaches on how to think through situations so that respond in biblical wisdom to situations as they present themselves.

The goal here is that you will be a peacemaker, who Jesus proclaimed is blessed in Mt 5.9. You can be a proactive peacemaker or you can be a proactive peace-breaker. What kinds of attitudes and actions characterize a peacemaker, one who pursues peace?

First (and these are in no particular order), a *peacemaker allows and appreciates differences between himself and others*. Again, this is rooted in the nature of God himself. God eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father. Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Son (and so on). They are distinct and different in the Persons and in their roles, but this does not put them at odds with one another. Indeed, as each member functions within his particular role in the Godhead, creation and redemption are accomplished. The diversity within the Godhead is a strength, not a weakness. There is unity within the Godhead, not uniformity. They are three distinct persons fulfilling different functions. Each pours himself into the others and depends upon the others. The differences are appreciated.

It should come as no surprise then that the church, the body of Christ, should reflect this unity and diversity as well. Paul speaks about in 1Cor 12, Rom 12, and Eph 4 in terms of the members of the church having different gifts and, therefore, responsibilities in the church. Paul works out that body metaphor to speak about the diversity of the body. The foot is not the hand. The ear is not the eye. Yet each individual, very different member is a part of this unified body. Peace within the body does not mean uniformity. Peace will not come when we get everybody out who is not exactly like us. That will only happen if you have a church of one ... yourself. Pursuing peace in allowing for and appreciating differences is not just a grudging *allowance*. It is not saying, "Yeah, I know people are different and I have to live with it, but I don't have to like it." Rather the peacemaker has an *appreciation* for the diversity. People are different and that is good. (We are, of course, not speaking about sinful differences. We will deal with that later.)

People have differences of *opinions*. Over non-essential matters this is not a problem. Paul deals with this in Rom 14. These are those matters in which it doesn't matter if you practice this or that. You need to allow space for others in these matters. Whether a lady nurses or bottle-feeds is not matter to fight over. Pursuing peace means leaving matters of differing opinions like this alone. Don't press your opinions as if they were biblical law. Instead, appreciate different opinions and approaches. This can also be done in matters of educating children. Pursuing peace involves appreciating a diversity of approaches. Homeschooling or community schooling is not *the* answer. The classical approach or another approach cannot be made into law. Peacemakers appreciate differences. Differences of opinion can be a tremendous benefit. "*As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.*" (Prov 27.17). Differences of opinions challenge us to re-think our positions and grow.

Peacemakers also recognize and appreciate differences in *personalities*. Some people are more driven. Some are more laid back. Some people are more social. Some are more to themselves. Some are more "big picture" people, some are more detailed oriented. These differences of personality should be appreciated as a strength between us. We need people with great, big ideas, and we need people who keep those people grounded in reality. Those who are much more cautious about taking chances need risk-taking personalities to move them out of their comfort zones at times.

Peacemakers also appreciated differences in *gifts*. Some people organize. Some people implement. Some people are more prominent. Some people are more behind-the-scenes. Some people are more creative and artsy. Some people are more analytical. The diversity of gifts within the body of Christ that Paul discusses in those passages mentioned earlier is not a weakness of the church but part of its strength. Peacemakers celebrate these differences and appreciate the fact that others are *not* like them. Pursuing peace or being a peacemaker means that you consciously focus on what is good about the other person. Sure, his opinion is different than yours. But what are its strengths? Where does it challenge the way you have been thinking? Yes, his personality is totally opposite of yours. What is the strength found in that? How can he do things that you cannot? So her gifts are different from yours. She can do things you cannot. How are her gifts an encouragement and a strength for the church that helps build you up? In order to pursue peace, you must make a conscious effort to focus on the good.

But if you want to be a *peace-breaker* (which you should not want to be) *be hyper-critical of others*. Focus on the weaknesses of the person all of the time and not on the strengths. If you are a hyper-critical person, you will have plenty of opportunities to learn the craft of the forgiveness process because you will think everything is a sin that needs to be confronted, and you will certainly offend other people often. Being hyper-critical is the way to destroy a relationship and culture of peacemaking. For the hyper-critical person the strengths of others are seen as a threat to his person and his position. The other person is only “showing off his strengths in order to make me look bad.” The different opinions of others are taken as “trying to prove me wrong.” Hyper-critical people are filled with fear and look for security and self-worth from being “right” or being the big man. They come across many times as self-assured and confident because they are so loud with their opinions, but generally they are extremely insecure. If someone around them does something well, the response of the hyper-critical is, “Yeah, but he could have done it better if ...” usually followed by how he would have done it. I am not saying that you can’t give constructive ways on how to improve. But if that is all that you are doing with everything everyone does, then you are intent on destroying relationships.

The hyper-critical peace-breaker stewes about the actions of others. He dwells on what they are doing or not doing all of the time (particularly in those actions and how they relate to himself). They are not positively pursuing what they are supposed to be doing. That is why they have so much time to think about you and what you ought to be doing. They nit-pick, finding faults with everything. This can be done in marriage. No matter how diligently your spouse works at fulfilling his/her responsibilities, he/she can’t do everything up to your standards. You will destroy the peace, the wholeness, the loving communion of your marriage this way.

Parents can be hyper-critical as well and exasperate their children; demanding an elusive perfection. They don’t receive praise of “Well done,” but there is always a “but.”

Hyper-criticism destroys the peace of friendships as well. “You’re not there for me enough.” But who knows what “enough” means? “You are not meeting my needs.”

Hyper-critical people can also destroy a church. Reformed circles are terrible about this. We measure people up all the time, waiting for them to say something in a slightly different way so that we can show our theological prowess and nail them to the wall. This can also be done in other ways. These people didn’t do that right (i.e. being translated “like I would have done it”) even though they were trying with all their might. The elders aren’t doing this. The deacons aren’t doing that.

Hyper-critical peace-breakers refuse to take into account the weakness or even simply the human limitations of others. They have unreasonable expectations of others. Hyper-critical peace-breakers refuse to take into account the life situation/history of people and consider that we

are all in different places in being conformed to the image of Christ. Everyone is supposed to be where I am, know all that I know, and being doing all that I think they ought to be doing.

Here are some questions to ask yourself for self-examination (or ask your spouse or close friend) to see if you are a peacemaker or peace-breaker. What do you think about when you see people with strengths that you don't have, opinions that differ from you, gifts that make them more prominent than you? Do you begrudge them of it, or do you rejoice in the fact that God has put you in relationship with them? What are your expectations of people? Are they really reasonable? Have you taken into account human limitations? Have you considered others' history, life-situation, and other factors before expecting them to be or do this or that?

Before being hyper-critical, you might want to spend some time with them to get to know where they have come from and where they are. Then you might not jump to conclusions. You might even find yourself with some compassion for the person. That is pursuing peace.

The second characteristic of a *peacemaker* I want to emphasize is the fact that he is *humble, esteeming others better than himself*. The one who pursues peace cares more about the needs of others than he does about his personal comforts. Paul writes to the church at Philippi and instructs them in matters of humility. There were obviously some problems in the church. In ch. 4 Paul calls down two leading ladies in the church and tells them to be of the same mind; i.e. they need to be at peace with one another. (By the way, could you imagine if names were called today from the pulpit of people who need to get matters right? That would be some serious seek-friendly action right there!) Paul addresses the whole church and tells them what type of attitude or, better, way of thinking they are to adopt. They are to be humble, esteeming others better than themselves. Paul then gives us that most famous passage that is more gleaned for its doctrine of Christ than it is for its instruction to the church, sad to say. The teaching of who Christ is and what he did are foundational for Paul's instruction on what humility is to look like in the church. Christ Jesus was in the very form of God but did not grasp after all of the privileges of who he was. He did not insist on his rights as God, but chose to humble himself by divesting himself of all of his privileges and rights, and, becoming a man, he went to die the shameful death of the cross so that we who were at enmity with God might be reconciled. In short, Jesus gave up all of his rights for our sake. He esteemed our needs and meeting those needs as greater than holding on to his rights. That is the type of humility that pursues peace. Later in the chapter he also shows how he, Timothy, and Ephaphroditus all exemplify this humility for the sake of the Philippians. Now, they are to pursue peace with one another through this same type of humility.

Humility pursues peace b/c it is always more concerned about the other person and his needs more than it is about its own comforts and desires. Humility is always asking and acting upon the question, "What can I do to serve the best interest of the other person?" Humility shows deference to others and their abilities and opinions. Humility listens to others and recognizes personal limitations and the strength of others. Humility seeks to exalt the other person. The humble person pursuing peace is asking, "What can I do to make this person look good?" "What can I do to help this other person feel better, accomplish his/her tasks, etc.?" He does this without regard for how it will make him look.

In marriage this takes on a particular shape. For instance, it means that you don't just think about what you've been through during the day and what you need at the end of the day, but it is considering what the other person has been through and needs at the end of the day. When husbands come home from work, humility that pursues peace not only asks about his wife's day but also how you can help her so that she can rest.

This also has meaning for wives as well. Meeting him at the door saying, "You need to do something with YOUR children," may not be the best way to promote peace in the home.

Humility is important in peace-pursuing in friendships as well. You are not always thinking about what your friend can do to meet your needs, but what you can do to meet his. Where does he need help? How can I be there for him?

In the church humility is obviously a must. The question should be, “Where can I help serve others?” That doesn’t have to be in a formally sanctioned program of the church. It may mean simply checking on others at times and seeing how you might be able to help them.

Pursuing peace sometimes means giving up your rights or not insisting upon your rights. Sometimes it is the right thing to do to insist upon your rights as Paul did when he appealed to Caesar. So, it is not always wrong. But there must be a greater purpose of peace when you make the decision. Jesus gave up his rights. Sometimes we are to do that as well. Ken Sande in his book *Peacemaker* rightly observes that, “God may even call you to give up a right that would be morally and legally justified. One way to imitate his mercy is to show sympathy, kindness, and compassion toward someone who is in need of help, even if he does not deserve it... One way to do this is to refrain from exercising legitimate rights and thus release others from their obligations...” (93) He goes on to say, “Rights are not something you deserve and possess for your own benefit. Rather, they are *privileges* given to you by God, and he wants you to use them for his glory and to benefit others, especially by helping them know Christ.” (94) Pursuing peace takes this attitude toward my *rights*, asking the question, “Is it best for the other person for me to relinquish my rights in this instance or to insist upon them?” The focus is still on the good of the other person.

This is what pursuing peace or being a peacemaker is. A *peace-breaker* insists on his own way *all of the time*. The peace-breaker is filled with the opposite of humility: *pride*. What happens when you have a room full of toddlers in the room and each one wants to do his own thing? Same thing you get in a church when you have the same thing: chaos. Insisting upon your own way means that it can’t be done right unless it is done the way you want it done. The way the other person is doing it is not necessarily sinful (though the prideful person can find away to accuse him of sin), but it is just different. Pride is the enemy of peace because peace demands that there be mutual submission between one another as Paul calls the church of Ephesus to do in Eph 5.21. Pride creates a standoff. Once again Proverbs instructs us, “By pride comes nothing but strife, But with the well-advised *is* wisdom.” (Prov 13.10) Wherever there is strife, you can be sure that the lofty hands of pride are working their craft. The exalted eyes of pride are peering around the corner.

Husband, come home and insist that you get to rest while your wife must continue to work. You will be a peace-breaker. Wife, load your husband down with all of your cares of the day when he walks in the door, not considering what he has been through. You will be a peace-breaker. Place demands on your friends that they must do things your way, on your time schedule, and meet your needs the way you insist they be met if you will give them privilege to remain friends with you and see how long your relationship lasts. Demand that you be served in the church. People need to be there for you on your schedule and the way you want them there. Don’t consider anyone else’s schedules or the demands on their time.

If you do these things you will be discontent with the situation *and* no one will want to be there for you because you are expecting things from them that they know that they will not be able to deliver. The needs of a self-absorbed person can never be met. They are like the leech and her two daughters: give and give (Prov 30.5). They drain everything around them and then simply try to find the next host. They have an unquenchable thirst. And when you can’t satisfy, then you are the problem. A sure and quick way to disrupt the peace of a relationship and set up a situation in which forgiveness will be put to the test is to insist on your own way. Always insist

upon your own rights.

Another way of insisting upon your rights that breaks the peace is to use your rights to escape doing what is right. We hear of cases in which criminals get off scot-free by using the Fourth Amendment. The police didn't have the warrant exactly right. It doesn't matter if they found a body in the house. We are appalled at stuff like this ... until we are the ones that need to face our responsibilities. How about using technicalities in the constitution of a church to escape dealing with your sin? That has happened countless times. You insist upon your "legal rights" to escape doing what is right before God.

Here are some questions to ask yourself (or, again, ask your spouse or close friend) to determine whether or not you are a peacemaker or peace-breaker in terms of humility. Am I so consumed with my own world and my perceived personal needs that I do not think about the needs of others? Am I willing to deprive myself of some comforts in order to meet the needs of others? Please note: if someone is not able to do something for you, what I say here doesn't give you the license to say, "You need to be more humble and do what I want you to do!" Humility that pursues peace seeks understanding of the other person's situation, not insisting on your perceived rights.

In terms of whether or not exercise your rights, Sande gives some questions for examination of the situation: "Will exercising my rights honor God by showing the power of the gospel in my life? Will exercising my rights advance God's kingdom—or will it advance only my interests at the expense of his kingdom? Will exercising my rights benefit others? Is exercising my rights essential for my own well-being?"

The wise peacemaker must use particular tools at particular times like a skilled craftsman. He will not use a hammer where a saw is needed. We must examine each situation, asking ourselves these and similar questions to determine whether or not we are acting in humility.

We are called to be peacemakers because the family in which we find our identity, the very name we bear, demands that we seek peace and pursue it. We must do this through allowing for and appreciating the non-sinful differences we have with others. We must do this through being humble and esteeming others better than ourselves. As we do these things, we will pursue and live in the peace that God intends for us.