

## THE LIFE OF FORGIVENESS: PURSUE PEACE (PART 2)

In the last *Koinonia* I began a series that I taught about forgiveness that arises out of Jesus' teaching in Mt 18 concerning causing offenses/sins and forgiving offenses/sins. Following the pattern of Mt 18, we are looking first at our responsibility to minimize the offenses we cause. Putting it positively we are learning what it means to pursue peace. Forgiveness is a way that we pursue peace, but forgiveness comes after the peace has been broken. We are wanting to learn how to maintain peace in relationships. This peace which we seek is not merely the cessation of conflict, but it is a relationship being what it ought to be the way God intends it. It is a relationship that is whole and healthy. Each person in the relationship loves the other(s) and is doing right by and for the other(s). This kind of peace is that which is enjoyed within the Godhead itself: Father, Son, and Spirit, who eternally exist in a relationship of love and peace with one another. We as God's image bearers and those brought into this family are meant to enjoy this peace with God through Christ and enjoy peace with one another. Sin has disrupted all of these relationships and because of that forgiveness must be a part of pursuing peace. But we are called to avoid sin as much as possible and seek not to cause offenses. *Christians must take a proactive approach to their relationships and seek and pursue peace, making every effort to avoid sinning against one another.* Pursuing and seeking peace is work that is commanded of us in places such as Psalm 34.14, 1Peter 3.10-11, and Romans 12.18.

In the last article we looked at two ways to be peacemakers and not peace-breakers. First, we learned that a peacemaker recognizes and appreciates the non-sinful differences of others while a peace-breaker is one who is hyper-critical about others and their differences. Second, we learned that a peacemaker esteems others and their needs as more important than his own comforts. He is a humble person. A peace-breaker will insist on his own way.

Turning our attention to a third contrast, we need to understand that a *peacemaker seeks to cover or overlook as many of the sins of others as possible, absorbing the cost himself as much as possible.* Those who pursue peace and seek after it learn that everything wrong that is done to them is not an offense worth confronting. There are some things that can simply be overlooked, let go, or covered b/c it is not the time or place to confront and/or it is really not that big of a deal. This is actually a form of forgiveness. It is absorbing the wrong in yourself, taking the other person's debt, as it were, and paying it yourself, so that the offender is free from any debt. Covering or overlooking a sin means that you don't deal with the other person about it and you don't hold on to it for the future.

Ken Sande, in his book *The Peacemaker*, explains that "Overlooking is not a *passive* process in which you simply remain silent for the moment but file away the offense for later use against someone. That is actually a form of denial that can easily lead to brooding over the offense and building up internal bitterness and resentment that will eventually explode in anger. Instead, overlooking is an *active* process that is inspired by God's mercy through the gospel. To truly overlook an offense means to deliberately decide not to talk about it, dwell on it, or let it grow into pent-up bitterness." (83) This cannot be done with every offense to be sure. And sometimes because of some personality types and a general desire to avoid confrontation, some of us may overlook where we should not overlook. We will deal with when to confront later. Even with that caveat, overlooking or covering certain sins—i.e. refusing to make the person pay through confrontation or even restitution—is an appropriate way to pursue peace with others. We read in Proverbs 19.11: "The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, And his glory *is* to overlook a transgression." Overlook here means that he simply passes over it. He doesn't make

an issue of it.

Overlooking or covering something may happen when someone says something to you that is insulting. He is trying to make himself look better by belittling you. Maybe this is uncharacteristic of the person. So, you simply let it go. It is not worth confronting. At times, overlooking an offense is the best thing you can do to pursue peace. But when are those times? Sande gives some good general guidelines that I believe are good rules of thumb.

First, it is appropriate to overlook an offense if it does not create a wall between you and the other person or caused you to feel differently toward the other person for more than a short period of time. If it has significantly altered your relationship and you find yourself stewing over it, then you shouldn't overlook it. Second, it is appropriate to overlook an offense only if it is not causing serious harm to God's reputation, to others, or to the offender himself. Overlooking offenses when they are harming any one of these turns out to be cowardice and not true, biblical love and forgiveness. There are times, then, when it is inappropriate to overlook an offense. But not every offense or sin in the other person *must* be confronted with the unvarnished "truth" every time you see it. God does not do that with us, and we should not do it with others.

Think about this: what if God told you all that he knew about you and your sins all at one time? What if God did not overlook some things that you do and expected you to deal with everything today? It would kill you. There is and will be a time to deal with things, and God will do so in time. But he doesn't do it all at once, nor does he do it every time we violate his perfect standard. A peacemaker learns how to extend mercy by overlooking minor and occasional offenses from others and in others. He considers that something may have contributed to this person's uncharacteristic action. Pursuing peace may mean thinking about questions such as, "I wonder what is making him so irritable today that he would say or do something like that? I wonder how I might be able to help?" Overlooking a sin doesn't mean that you say under your breath, "I forgive you, you jerk."

Pursuing peace in overlooking offenses also takes into account my own sensitivities. Maybe I am going through something in my life that is making me overly sensitive. Maybe I am stressed and anything that resembles a cross word I am ready to jump on. Maybe I tend to be idealistic; i.e. I have this image of the way things ought to be and can be. Nobody meets that standard, so I walk around disgruntled and discontent and ready to confront everything that moves.

Pursuing peace means work in terms of thinking though others' situations as well as my own to determine whether or not this is something that really needs confronting or if it is something that can be appropriately overlooked. When a person is not willing to do the hard work here, he is likely to be a peace-breaker. The *peace-breaker demands payment of every little sin that anyone commits against him*. Everything is a hill to die on. Everything is at stake because of this offense. For this reason, the person that has offended me needs to hear about his sin (probably more than once would be helpful!) and he needs to apologize, ask forgiveness, make restitution, and kiss my ring before he leaves my presence.

Sometimes we couch our unwillingness to cover offenses in the most pious terms. We are concerned about "the truth." The person needs to hear and accept the unvarnished truth. While your version may be in accord with the facts, it may not be "the truth" biblically speaking. Biblically, "the truth" has more to do with faithfulness than it does with stating all the facts. Faithfulness to other people at times means not telling them certain things that may be factual; or withholding some things that you know. We sometimes equate telling the truth to telling everything that goes through our heads. But the Bible tells us that this is the characteristic of a fool (Prov 12.23; 14.33; 29.11). There are some things that may be in accord with the facts that

you just don't have to say. If you want to be a peace-breaker, go around telling "the truth" in this way to everyone. If you do so, you will not be telling the truth in a biblical fashion.

Of course, we have more pious reasons to tell the truth like this. We are concerned about holiness; holiness for the other person as well as demonstrating our own holiness. But as Gregory Jones reminds us, "... one of the signs of holiness is an ability to absorb sin and evil without passing them on to others." (*Embodying Forgiveness*, 299) Our all-holy God absorbs sin in himself. Our holiness is reflected when we act like him, not when we conjure up some personal definition of holiness.

Here are a few questions for examination when you get into a situation in which you must decide whether or not to overlook an offense. Is this action harming the reputation of God? Is this action harming others? Is this action harming this person? Some self-examination also needs to take place. Am I bothered by what people do or don't do all of the time? Do I have my feelings hurt or become angry often with others? Do I consider the other person's situation before jumping to conclusions and confronting the person? Am I being too sensitive?

A peacemaker is one who can overlook an offense when it is appropriate. A peacemaker also *asks for forgiveness and provides restitution without having it "forced" on him*. A necessary qualification here is that you know an offense has been committed. Sometimes we might be oblivious to the fact that a person has been offended by our words or actions. So, I am talking about when you know you have done something wrong that has disrupted the relationship.

Running from your responsibilities is not pursuing peace. It is exacerbating the problem and increasing the discord. Trying to hide your sin or justify it to yourself so that you don't have to deal with it is not pursuing peace. What Jesus says in Matthew 5.23-26 is exemplary of what we are to be doing. "Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny." When you know you have done something or someone has something against you, you do not wait for the other person to come to you. You pursue him and seek peace. Make things right. Own up to your wrong-doing even before having to be confronted and asked to make restitution and you will go a long way not only in restoring a relationship but also in building trust that is necessary to sustain a relationship of peace.

Let's say you borrow something from your friend. It could be a chainsaw or a dish or anything in between. While in your possession it is broken. You don't return it in pieces and say, "Sorry, it broke," and then walk away. You fix it better than new or replace it. Interestingly, this was a part of God's law in Exodus 22.14-15 as he taught his people how to live at peace with one another. Don't wait until the person has to ask you to repair or replace it or even has to force you to do it through church courts or otherwise. Make it right. When you do the other person will respect you and trust you more. You have taken a great step toward greater peace.

Pursuing peace like this in any relationship is vital to maintaining peace. If you know something is wrong between you and your spouse, you and your friend, you and your children, or in any other relationship, even if you don't know exactly what the problem may be, pursue making it right w/o having to be asked.

But if you want to be a peace-breaker *keep hiding your sin by ignoring it, being stubborn, or excusing it until it can't be avoided any longer*. A peace-breaker is not concerned about the health and wholeness of his relationship with others but only about what he wants and does not

want. Confessing his sin and seeking restitution will cost him in embarrassment or maybe even financially, and he doesn't want to pay the price.

Ignoring breaches in relationships may come from fear of dealing with situations, or it may come from a pride that is unwilling to pay the price. No matter the motivation, they are both, at their root, selfish and self-centered. Sticking your proverbial head in the sand, is not pursuing peace but encouraging that which is destroying the relationship to continue to destroy the relationship. There are also people who promote peace-breaking by being stubborn. "She knows where I am. If she wants to make it right, she can come to me." We also promote peace-breaking by excusing our sin so that we have reason not to deal with it. "I only acted this way because he did this to me. It is not my fault, and, therefore, it is not my responsibility to seek reconciliation." That is not the conclusion that Jesus gives us.

Any of these actions deteriorates trust in relationships because you are neglecting ownership of your responsibility to the other(s). Your responsibility is to pursue peace. Don't wait until someone must confront you. If you know there is something wrong between you and your spouse, friend, or child, go make it right as soon as possible. If you have sinned publicly, even though it may not be known just yet, don't wait until you are hunted down to tell the church (i.e. the elders). Confess it. Own up to it. Seek peace before it gets to the matter of being forced to confront it.

Another characteristic of a peacemaker is *that he refuses to pay back wrong for wrong but returns good for evil*. This will come into the picture even more when we deal with forgiveness, but it is something that needs to be mentioned in relation to our positively pursuing peace. This is the action of the offended party, not the one in sin. Paul deals with this in Romans 12.19-21: "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Peter tells us basically the same thing in 1Peter 3.8-12 where he follows it up by Christ's own example of not returning evil for evil. This is similar to covering offenses, but is even more active. When you have been wronged, you don't return the wrong. Rather, you return good for evil.

For example, say someone insults you and you have a real zinger to put him in his place, cut him down to size, and restore your position in the eyes of others around you. Instead of using that good line that you are dying to use, you either say nothing at all, ask him why he thinks this about you, ask for forgiveness if the insult comes from something that you've done, or your return a compliment. And here is a qualification for all of those actions: you do it without sarcasm. Sarcasm in this situation is not returning good for evil but is only another way to return evil for evil. You are still trying to make the other person look bad. When you respond like this, the person may see the error of his way and respond by asking your forgiveness. Responding in kind will only justify his wrong to himself. Pursuing peace sometimes means taking insults and such the like and responding by doing good to the other person (which can take many forms).

On the other hand, a *peace-breaker always seeks to get even*. He is not satisfied until the wrong has been righted in his mind. The peacemaker realizes that even if the person does not repent and restore the relationship, vengeance belongs to our God (Rom 12.19) and is willing to leave it with him to repay even if it costs him for the present. The peace-breaker can't live by faith, believing that God will take vengeance at the proper time and proper way. Everything must be dealt with now. The person must pay. Insult for insult. Hit for hit. This exacerbates the chasm, deepens the divide so that peace is more difficult to achieve. We like to say, "I must have a sense of resolution to this. I must have some closure for the situation." (This is terribly over-used in our

society.) Being interpreted, this means “I can’t wait for God to exercise his vengeance on the person at the proper time, I must see with my own eyes, right now, that this person gets his comeuppance.” The peace-breaker is afraid that this will not be resolved to his liking.

This happens between siblings and our younger children in a quite obvious way at times. A brother, sister, or friend says or does something that you don’t like. Don’t make the problem worse by responding in the same way back to them. Do good to them. You have a responsibility to pursue peace.

Here are some questions we need to ask ourselves concerning this area of pursuing peace: What is more important to me: my relationship with this person or the things of which I being deprived? Do I want peace with this person more than I want to save face?

A sixth characteristic of a peacemaker is that he *speaks words that minister grace to hearers, building them up instead of unnecessarily tearing them down*. In Ephesians 4 Paul is instructing the Ephesians how to live as the new humanity, the new images of God in Christ. Part of that instruction deals with how we are to speak to one another word that minister grace to the hearer and are good for his edification or building up. Yes, there are times when gracious words tear down, but they tear down that which hinders peace; i.e. they deal with sin. Gracious words, therefore, are not words that “drip” with some artificial sweetness. This is not a call to plastic relationships that avoid dealing with unpleasant situations or people. But what about when you don’t have to deal with sin? How are we to speak with one another? We think about our words and speak words that fit the particular need of the hour. As Paul says, these are words that are appropriate for the occasion. The peacemaker considers the person and the situation and asks, “What word does this person need at this moment that will help him the most? Someone who is discouraged needs a word of encouragement. Someone who is hurting needs a word of comfort. Someone who is doing well needs a word of praise. We look for opportunities to build others up by our words.

A peace-breaker, however, *tears others down with words unnecessarily in order to exalt himself*. Proverbs 12.18 describes words that are like the piercings of a sword emphasizing destruction. These are reckless words that have no good intention. We can do this at times and then excuse it by saying that we were joking. There is a place for some fun banter between one another, but we must be careful because words can sting; especially when someone may be going through something of which we are unaware.

Gossip breaks the peace. Gossip is saying behind someone’s back what you would never say to his face. Tale-bearers, as the Bible also calls them, are those who carry information about others to people who are not a part of the problem or part of the solution.

Direct falsehood destroys the peace. Slander and libel are obvious characteristics of a peace-breaker.

Trying to make people look stupid so that you can look superior is not ministering grace through our words. We can do this as husbands with our wives by correcting one another all of the time in front of others. Sometimes correction of factual errors can wait until we get out of the presence of others.

So, let us ask ourselves in these situations: Do I really need to say anything at this point in time? What would be the appropriate word to speak that will build this person up? What does this person really need to hear? Am I speaking words that intentionally belittle him so that I can look better?

Next, a peacemaker *is one who learns to how to be submissive to others*. This is related to humility but emphasizes some different points than I did when I deal with humility. Paul, in continuing his discussion about what it means to be the new humanity in Ephesians, before he

speaks about wives being submissive to husbands, he tells us all that we need to be submissive to one another (Eph 5.21). Here he is speaking about learning to defer to one another. We show deference to others' gifts, abilities, authority, and such the like. The one who pursues peace learns how to submit in this way to others.

However, the *peace-breaker is one who must control others*. He believes that is the only one who ought to be in charge, and if he is not, he will not participate. Unless everything is done his way, he is picking up his marbles and playing with another group. He doesn't recognize and appreciate the authority of others because of their gifts and abilities. He thinks that the only way there will be peace is through domineering control. Domineering people tyrannize people and try to hold things together with some type of fear or intimidation. This may produce what looks like peace for a while. But it is peace-faking, not peacemaking. Tyranny is the enemy of peace.

The *peacemaker is also one who keeps his commitments*. Integral to peace in relationships is each person in the relationship fulfilling his or her responsibilities to the other(s). This can be summed up in words like being *faithful* or being *trustworthy*. As all of these qualities of peacemaking, this finds its archetype in God himself where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are mutually submissive and each fulfills his responsibility to promote the health of the whole. In the body, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, each joint supplies something to the whole body. Wholeness in the body is contingent upon each member functioning as it is supposed to function.

Fulfilling your commitments is vital to peace in relationships. When you commit to something, follow through all the way. Don't side step or try to avoid responsibility. A sign of faithfulness and a characteristic of someone who will dwell with God in his house is one who commits to something and fulfills it, even if it is to his own hurt (Ps 15.4). That kind of faithfulness to your word/commitments builds trusts in relationships. People know that they can depend upon you, so they can commit more of themselves to you. This ranges from being faithful to your spouse in marriage to being where you said you were going to be when you said you were going to be there. Pursuing peace in this area of commitment means that you don't drop one commitment because a better offer came along.

A peace-breaker *neglects his commitments*. He is like a broken tooth or a foot out of joint (Prov 25.19). It is painful to be in a relationship with this type of person. A person who doesn't keep his commitments burdens the other person in some way. Think about it, when one body part is not functioning correctly, others must compensate for it in some form or fashion. In marriage, men and women, when you don't fulfill your responsibilities as a husband or wife, you leave a burden on the other that must be made up somehow and can certainly cause resentment, breaking the peace. In friendships, not being considerate of your friend's time and effort will break the peace. So it is within the church. Not following through with commitments leaves gaps.

So, don't make commitments too hastily. When you do make commitments follow through with them ... even when it is unpleasant. Don't drop your commitments when something more fun comes along that you would rather do.

For example, let's say that you make a commitment to help someone on a particular Saturday during the fall. Then a friend comes along and has two tickets to the big football game. You may see if the other person will release you from that commitment (because you are in debt to him by your word). But if the person really needs you there, follow through. Your relationships are more important than a football game.

Here are some more of those pesky questions: Have I counted the cost of the commitment I am making in terms of time and resources? Am I willing to follow through with this commitment even when it is not fun anymore? Do I fulfill my commitments to others, or am I always finding ways to get out of or make excuses as to why I don't have to fulfill my

commitments?

The ninth characteristic of a peacemaker that I want to mention is that a peacemaker *is one who is quick to hear and slow to speak*. James exhorts us, “Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath.” (Jms 1.19) The more you talk unnecessarily, the greater your chances to sin against someone and rupture the peace of a relationship. “In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips *is wise*.” (Prov 10.19) You need not always insert yourself into a conversation. People will grow weary of you because it tends to come across as being a know-it-all or simply an attention-getter (i.e. you need people to recognize you). Listening without speaking is a discipline. It shows deference to others. Listening to others, concentrating on what they’re saying and not thinking about what you are going to say next, respects them and appreciates their words. Listening well promotes peace because it is a form of humility. It also promotes peace because you will have greater opportunity to understand what is going on with the other person. If you are always having to speak, chances are you are not really understanding the other person and are jumping to conclusions with half the story.

But if you want to be a peace-breaker *speak quickly and often*. Don’t think about what you have to say. Talk all the time. Interrupt others when they are speaking because what you have to say is much more important than what that dope has to say. A person like this is always thinking about what he is going to say next instead of what the other person is saying. Consequently he is reaching conclusions without all of the information. Silence is not always a bad thing between two people. At least one may be thinking about what he is going to say.

Meditate on these questions: Do I talk too much and too often? Do I really listen to people, or am I always thinking of the next thing I want to say? Do I seek understanding through clarifying what people say, or do I jump to conclusions?

The last characteristic of a peacemaker that I want to deal with is that a *peacemaker is one who shows hospitality*. Paul instructs the Romans literally to “pursue hospitality;” i.e. be diligent to show hospitality. Hospitality is actually a pretty big theme in Scripture. Like everything else about our relationships, it is based in God himself whose creation and redemption of man can be understood in terms of hospitality. Hospitality is taking in “strangers,” or people different from you. God does this as the Creator by taking in the creature to his divine family. Pursuing peace in relationships involves being hospitable to others; involving them in your life at some level. It could be something as simple (yet profound) as inviting them to a meal. It could be taking in an orphan or a widow. The church as a whole is to be showing hospitality in this way by welcoming the stranger. We sometimes call this evangelism, but it is God’s hospitality which invites the outsider to come to his house and eat with him. Hospitality is love that has overflowed the banks of close relationships and extended to those who are not so close to us so as to draw them closer. Hospitality is not something that can necessarily be programmed from the top down. It is exemplified by officers in the church and is to be emulated by others. Pursuing peace means pursuing hospitality to others; actively showing love to those outside of your nuclear family.

People may complain, “No one ever invites me over or wants to do anything with me.” Invite them to do things with you. *You* pursue hospitality. Don’t wait for someone to extend it to you. Take someone out to lunch. Invite them to your house. Include others in doing whatever you do if at all possible. This is pursuing peace. It is active, not passive.

The *peace-breaker is one who is closed in on himself and his own*. He doesn’t climb out of the comfortable, close relationships of his own family, for instance, to appreciate and welcome the ones different from him. Lack of hospitality wittingly or unwittingly cuts us off from others and therefore severs what we are supposed to be pursuing. When we don’t look outside of ourselves and our own, we develop a “bunker mentality” so that life becomes about protecting

me and mine. Anything or anyone outside that is different becomes a threat. They are like a disease that might infect my perfect little sterile world. This is not to say that there are not real threats that we need to avoid. There are. But be careful of seeing all differences—philosophies in parenting, differences of personalities, etc.—as matters to keep you from pursuing hospitality.

As we consider this we need to ask ourselves: Do I show the love of God to people in tangible ways? Do I wait for people to be hospitable to me, or am I pursuing peace by being hospitable to others?

Pursuing peace is just that: a pursuit. It will not just happen. It takes active engagement and heart commitment. But it is the life to which we have been called because we are a part of God's family, and his family is to be characterized by peace. He has given us what we need to pursue this peace with one another. Let us then be diligent to do what God has commanded.