

The Christian Life  
Part 3 Living Peacefully  
James 3:13 - 4:10

Folks with little appreciation for the Good News of the Gospel or for that matter Christianity in general might view the theme of this morning's message with contempt or ridicule. I say that not to condemn them for their opinions but rather to have us face an important truth. The illusive peace that much of the world seeks is not the peace that the Scriptures promise can be ours through faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus reminded His early disciples, and He reminds us that the peace He brings, and the peace of the world are two different things. **John 14:27** As with grace and justice, there is both a spiritual and a social aspect and understanding of the word. Last week we saw how our appreciation and gratitude for the gift of grace from God will bring about social grace, changes in attitudes and behavior. Divine justice, God's justice, in other words Biblical justice, is not one and the same with social justice, although the two are distantly related. Peace in the spiritual realm is overcoming fear, specifically the fear of evil, death, and divine judgment. Peace of a worldly nature is typically understood to be the result of overcoming war and strife, a tranquil and serene state of being where violence and bloodshed are replaced with love, compassion, and kindness. Both are noble and worthy pursuits, different yet intricately related. Even so, what good is worldly peace, if we remain fearful or oblivious of the new world that Jesus and the Scriptures promise us will come?

Either way, the absence of peace is not a social problem, but a spiritual one. It is a symptom of a broken heart. The problem we face is that even though much of our society yearns for all people to live in peace and harmony with one another, there is widespread disagreement on how best to achieve it. It is true that worldly peace begins with moral values, legislation and law and order, but those things alone cannot bring about the change we desire and require. The illusive peace that so many seek will only come from true faith in Jesus Christ, and two thousand years ago He came to earth in love to show us how to find it. After His crucifixion and resurrection, He left His Holy Spirit behind to equip and prepare one group of people to pick up where He left off in changing broken hearts. That group is the church.

The role of the church in helping the world find peace is twofold. We are to help people understand that personal sin is the root cause of a lack of peace, and we are to show the world that the love of Jesus Christ is the solution, in fact the only solution to overcoming fear and violence. The reality is that we stand in stark opposition to a great number of people who believe something quite the opposite. Those in the world claim that someone else or something else is to blame for society's problems and they turn to the politics of division to fix it. Some even go so far to claim that religion, specifically Christianity is part of the problem. There is a reason for that upside-down broken cross in the peace symbol. They point to ugly events of the past, usually the Crusades of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries or the lack of unity within the church.

Those in the world will continue to seek peace without Christ, even going so far to blame Christians or God for its failure to find it. But we know better. We know the truth, and we have the choice, the ability, and the power to go in a different direction and invite others to follow our lead. It is more than a choice- it is a command. **Hebrews 12:14** Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. The relationship between peace and holiness is unmistakable and undeniable. It is impossible to have one without the other. We see the futile results of those who refuse to believe that on a daily basis. A world that lives without pursuing holiness is a world that lives in fear and violence. A world with no holiness is a world with no peace.

In simple terms, holiness is the state of being set apart and used by God for His divine purpose. In Wesleyan terms we would use the word sanctification. It is a process, a journey, a lifestyle, it is not what we do or don't do but something Jesus did and does for us. In the Battle Hymn of the Republic the hymnwriter said "Jesus died to make men holy".

**Romans 5:1** His death and resurrection secures our pardon from sin and our faith in Jesus frees us from the guilt and fear of sin. Through His Son Jesus, God is at peace with us, and we are at peace with God. Living peacefully is overcoming the fear of death, judgment, and condemnation. **Living peacefully is giving ourselves up to God.** Without peace and holiness, the world will continue to live in fear and violence. Until we live in peace and holiness, we will not be able to fulfill the great commission, making disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

The question for us is not whether peace is attainable, but rather how we can best attain it. What will keep us from being set apart for the glory of God? What keeps us from living peacefully? Though we might think the list is long, it is not. There is only one thing that keeps us from living peacefully and that is sin. It matters not whether it is great or small, sin is terribly effective in separating us from God. The good news is that the cross of Jesus bridges the gap and removes the pain of separation. Even so, there are some forms of sin with greater power of destruction than others. Murder and deceit are two that come to mind. Even though we can find pardon and forgiveness for them, the earthly effects will remain long after the acts are done.

James adds two other destructive things that will keep us from living peacefully. They are found in verse 16. Envy and ego are at the root of disorder and wickedness of every kind. They are earthly, unspiritual and works of the devil. The word bitter in this passage refers to something that is undrinkable or poisonous. Bitter jealousy is resenting the things that others might have or despising others that have more things than we do. It results in poisoned attitudes and the harboring of hatred in our hearts. The things we are jealous of might be physical- possessions, money, and the like but they can also be intangible things like talents, appearance, respect, and even spiritual gifts. When we are resentful of what other people have and think that what they have is either undeserved or gained at our expense, the tendency is to think of ways to even things out. Often violence and bloodshed will be the means of doing that. Someone has nicer shoes than I do, and they didn't have to work as hard as I do to get them, so I feel entitled to take them. Someone seems to be more spiritual than me, so I spread gossip to try and bring them down. Someone does something to disrespect me, so I get even by killing them.

Selfish ambition can be just as destructive. That is the idea that I am going to get all I can get, and it doesn't matter who I am going to step on or step over to get it. In Jesus day, it referred to a politician who entered politics and then used other people to achieve a selfish agenda. Today selfish ambition is often described as greed, which Webster's defines as a selfish and excessive desire for more of something (as money) than is needed. It often extends beyond accumulation of money to an accumulation of power, which is even more damaging. Money buys things, but power changes things, and usually that change is not for the better.

Power leads to corruption, and corruption leads to violence as power can be so intoxicating people will do anything to keep it, including killing ones perceived enemies. There can be no doubt that bitter envy and selfish ambition are behind the violence and strife that is separating us from each other and from God. They are robbing us of the peace we vainly seek. So, what is the answer? A loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

James reminds us that when we draw near to Him, He will draw near to us. **4:8 Living peacefully is desiring to be in His presence**, and it begins when we reach out to Him in humility and gratitude. The words of the psalmist sum it up this way in **Psalm 73: 25-28**.

Our second hymn of praise Blessed Assurance was written by Fanny Crosby. Fanny was an early Methodist rescue mission worker. She became blind as an infant, and some believe her blindness was caused by a well-meaning doctor who placed mustard poultices on her eyes to help cure her of a severe ailment that was afflicting her. But rather than allow bitterness to poison her attitude she went on to write more hymns than any other Methodist in history other than Charles Wesley, writing over 8000 hymns with 100 million copies in print.

A Scottish minister once said to her that it was too bad God had allowed her to become blind. She quickly responded-If I had been given a choice at birth, I would have asked to be blind. For when I get to heaven the first face I see will be the one who died for me. She didn't lash out in anger at the man who caused her blindness or the minister who tried to blame God but instead showed how Jesus had brought her peace. Fanny Crosby lived in peace despite her circumstances, and the peace she found was from our Lord Jesus above. Jesus offers that same peace to you and me, and anyone else who asks.

The God we yearn to be near is a God of mercy and grace, a God of love and relationship, and also a God of justice that requires us to pursue holiness and peace. God has given us His Son so that we might have both. Jesus is calling each one of us into a loving relationship with Him. **Living peacefully begins and ends with Jesus**. My prayer is that we will be agents of His peace and truly change the world by our love for Him. Amen