

The Life of Peace – Various Passages

Sermon – Pastor Joe Davis

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INTRODUCTION

Bill just shared an article on Facebook that he thought did a great job expressing his view on a controversial issue in America today. The article was well-written and respectful of other views and provided many logical arguments supporting the conclusions the author had reached. But as you might imagine, a few of Bill's Facebook "friends" disagreed with the conclusions presented in the article and didn't hesitate to loudly and emotionally express that disagreement in not-so-kind ways. In fact, Bill was shocked at how ugly and hurtful the comments quickly became from his so-called "friends" on Facebook, and he even found himself being sucked into responding in a not-so-kind manner to a few of the comments. He even decided to "un-friend" a few of the people...a very convenient tool on Facebook when people drive you crazy...kind of like having that remote we've all longed for where we can just shut people off when they're getting on our nerves: "You're done!"

Well, that was Bill. But let me tell you about Jenny and her challenges. Jenny's a believer in Christ and a regular church attender. But last week at church one of the other ladies made a really hurtful comment that to Jenny felt like a knife to the heart. She felt judged and written off as worthless and having nothing to offer. And even worse, the lady who made the comment didn't even seem to realize how hurt Jenny was by it. Just shows what a cold-hearted "snake" she is, thought Jenny, as she proceeded to tell several church friends about the experience and made every effort to avoid any contact with "that" woman.

Both of these situations are common examples of how PEACE in our relationships with other people, even other believers, can so easily be broken down and lead to ending of relationships and forfeiting of any opportunity to show grace and be the hands and feet of Christ to the world and to one another. But, my friends, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, invites us to a much different way of living life in the world and in the body of Christ. And his way is so desperately needed in the world we live in today!

Do you happen to remember those words from Luke 1:79 that described what Jesus would come to do? He would come:

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Having brought us to permanent peace with God through repentance and faith in him, he invites us to allow that peace to take root, to grow and blossom; transforming our relationships with other people as we begin walking in *the way of peace* using *the principles of peace*, which we we've already examined, and then living *the life of peace*, which will be the focus of our study this morning. It's in implementing and using the principles of peace that we will begin moving into the life, or lifestyle, of peace in our relationships with other people. And that's what we want to focus on today.

THE LIFE OF WAR

But before we examine what Scripture teaches us about the life of peace, we need to understand it's opposite, what I'm going to call the life of war. Romans 3:10-18 reveals well this life of war...the lifestyle of those who have not come to peace with God. Let's read it and see what it has to say:

10 as it is written: None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. 13 Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. 14 Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. 15 Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 in their paths are ruin and misery, 17 and the way of peace they have not known. 18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Notice that these verses describe the lives of people who have not known the way of peace. And the reason they haven't known it is rooted in their relationship, or should I say, lack of relationship with God. The source of the problem is revealed in the last verse: ***There is no fear of God before their eyes.***

They're approaching life as enemies of God...people who are either denying his existence altogether or denying he has any authority over their lives or right to their honor and worship. In fact, what they're really doing is putting themselves on the throne that belongs to God alone, and the focus of their lives is on what they want and desire for themselves. And if they want something bad enough, they'll go to almost any lengths to get it...no matter what their conscience says or what they know to be right and wrong. They'll lie, deceive, gossip, say hurtful things, curse others, hold bitterness in their hearts, and even at times resort to violence in words or actions. The way of peace they have definitely not known. And this is where we all live life before we come to Christ.

This is the life of war. And its war because what else would be the result when each person is living for themselves above all and what they want is their highest priority? If we're all just looking out for our own interests and trying to get what we want at the expense of others, we're going to have some major conflict...even all-out war. James hits the target on this one. He says:

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice (James 3:16).

That's a simple fact of life, and we see it all around us in the world...the life of war.

THE LIFE OF PEACE

But when we come to peace with God through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, a whole new world of possibilities opens up. Suddenly, we find that we are accepted, valued, and loved as we are in Christ. We've become a new creation, a saint, a child of God, holy and dearly loved, no longer needing to prove our worth or earn God's love. And the more we come to know God and believe and live his truth as we follow his principles of peace, the more he himself and his good purposes for us and other people are what we desire above all...the more he reworks our priorities and how we spend our time and begins to teach us how to live his life of peace...putting down these weapons of war we've gotten so skilled at using to get what we want and becoming instead, a peacemaker...one who brings peace into every relationship we have in our circle of influence.

I want to show you now, from Scripture, three transformations God wants to bring about in the life of every follower of Christ, as he leads us into the life of peace. These transformations were modeled for us by Jesus during his 30 some years on earth, and become possible for us when we come to peace with God through him and begin following his principles of peace. They become possible when we rest in the eternal value and significance God has given us in Christ and begin setting our minds on him instead of the things of the world.

From Serving Self to Serving Christ

The first and really the foundational transformation that must take place if we want to begin living the lifestyle of peace is this: *From Serving Self to Serving Christ*. Without this earth-shattering shift in our thinking and focus, the rest of the transformations won't become real possibilities in our lives. To live the life of peace, we have to give up the core motivating factor that leads to the life of war: *selfish ambition*. We must heed the wise words of Paul in Philippians 2, verses 3 and 4:

Do NOTHING from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Selfish ambition and conceit. That natural human tendency to put ourselves above all and seek after what we think we want no matter the cost to other people. Are you ready to that behind? I'll tell you there's really only one way you'll be able to do it: *you and I need to know and embrace and be secure in who we now are in Christ and believe that he really is what we want and his ways are the best ways to live life*. As long as we're still believing that health and wealth and material things and being successful and proving our value to others are the top priorities in life, we will always struggle to leave behind the lifestyle of war, because selfish ambition will still cloud everything we do.

I went through a period in the last year or two of my accounting career when, looking back, I can see that selfish ambition clouded some of the choices I made...choices that on the surface didn't seem wrong, and yet the motivation for them was truly selfish ambition. I was tired of being stuck doing the same thing I'd been doing for 10 years. I wanted to move up and grow and lead and expand

my skills, but my manager wasn't on the same page and had said no to my request for help with additional education and certification. So what did I do? I went and secretly did it on my own, paid for it myself and then showed up one day with my new certification.

You could say, "Wow, that shows you have dedication to your job and willingness to do whatever you need to do to get better at it!" But really, if I'm honest, my motivation was selfish ambition. I wanted to take matters into my own hands and show him I could do it and then shove it into his face...in love, of course! And as you might expect, my manager wasn't too thrilled about it, it further strained our relationship, and it got me nowhere. Selfish ambition and good relationships just don't go together, you may have noticed!

And that's because selfish ambition is not just harmless and neutral. Remember what James said about it? Let's look a little closer at that passage, James 3:13-18:

13 Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15 This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16 For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

Selfish ambition and its partner, jealousy, are not harmless. They're not something we should tolerate and allow to linger in our lives. Instead they're earthly, unspiritual, even (Yikes!) DEMONIC. They're what led Satan himself to rise up against God, his Creator and the Lord of all. And wherever selfish ambition is allowed to linger, we can expect disorder and every vile practice. We can expect the life of war to continue.

In contrast, look at what James then goes on to say in verses 17 and 18 about the life of peace...the lifestyle that leaves behind selfish ambition:

17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

The wisdom from above leaves behind selfish ambition. It has good intentions for the other person and doesn't just consider what we want out of the deal. And what's the result when we approach life this way? A harvest of righteousness! We live the lifestyle of peace. God's purposes are accomplished and we and other people become more like Christ in the process.

From Pride and Power Trips to Humility and Gentleness

And this brings us to the second transformation of the lifestyle of peace: *From Pride and Power Trips to Humility and Gentleness*. And this transformation is the natural result of leaving behind selfish ambition. When we we're no longer having our own selfish interest as our top priority...when we're no longer trying to advance ourselves and our own agenda and use other people to accomplish our goals or affirm our value, we can live in the meekness of wisdom that James spoke about and that Jesus modeled for us. We can move from pride and power trips to humility and gentleness. And what a transformation it is!

When we see and believe the truth that apart from Christ we can do nothing, we begin to live in true humility and pride falls away. When we understand that discerning and following God's will and not our own is the wisdom from above, we're freed from power trips...trying to manipulate people to get them to do what we want and even throwing "adult" tantrums when we don't get our way or people don't get on board with our ideas. And it's here that our eyes begin opening to see other people and their giftings and their God-given ideas and to see that we're on a team together to live as the body of Christ everywhere we go. We can't do it alone! Here we discover the importance of patience and gentleness and doing everything in love so that we can be a unified body representing Christ well. And this becomes so much more important than getting our way or trying to push what we want personally. We leave that in the hands of God and trust the wisdom of our Savior, who said: ***"everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted"*** (Luke 18:14b).

Paul, expresses this aspect of the lifestyle of peace well in Ephesians 4:1-3:

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and

gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And again in Colossians 3:14-15:

14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. That what's we've been called to and when we let his peace rule, instead of our own selfish ambition, the result is a unified body living in love toward each other and revealing the glory of God to the world around us wherever we go.

Are you aware of any struggles in your own life with pride or power trips? It's so easy to be blinded in this area. J. Oswald Sanders offers three tests see if we're struggling here:

- 1) *The test of precedence.* How do we react when another is selected for the position we wanted to fill? When another is promoted in our place? When another's gifts seem greater than our own?
- 2) *The test of sincerity.* In our moments of honest self-reflection, we often admit to problems and weaknesses. How do we feel when others identify the same problems in us?
- 3) *The test of criticism.* Does criticism lead to immediate resentment and self-justification? Do we rush to criticize the critic?

These are some questions to ask ourselves as we seek to move from pride and power trips to humility and gentleness.

From Planning Punishment to Planning Peace

And this brings us to the third and final transformation of the life of peace: *From Planning Punishment to Planning Peace.* Listen to the wisdom of Proverbs 12:20:

Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy.

I just love this picture of *planning peace*. It suggests forethought and preparation and thinking through how we're going to bring peace into any given situation. It teaches us to put aside deceit and manipulation and trying to get what we want, and instead look and plan for God's purposes in the situation. *What does God want to accomplish in me through this?* And as I think about the other people involved, *what would be the most God-pleasing, God-honoring result for them?* INSTEAD OF ASKING: *What do I want to make this person do so I can solve this problem and make life easier for me?* WE ASK: *What is God seeking to accomplish in this person's life and in my life through this conflict? Where do both they and myself need to grow? What will further God's purposes in this situation? What a change these questions would bring to the way we respond to conflict!*

Archbishop Benson offered this advice: "Before confrontation or censure, obtain from God a real love for the [other person]. Know the facts; be generous in your judgment. Otherwise, how ineffective, how unintelligible or perhaps provocative your well-intentioned censure may be." Obtain from God a real love for the other person involved and a desire for their good. That's a great way to plan peace instead of planning punishment! Because aren't we so skilled at punishing other people in subtle and not so subtle ways when they've stepped on our toes or offended us or got in the way of what we wanted? It's a skill we acquire early in life and then hone to a fine-tuned process from there on out.

We're so very good at letting people know when we're ticked off about something. And there are as many styles of doing this as there are people in the world. A few people just blurt it out in a burst of anger and then disappear with a slammed door. But more often, because so many of us dislike confrontation, it's done in much more subtle ways...the "cold shoulder"...ignoring phone calls and text messages...telling other people about your frustrations...avoiding the person...and in some cases, even working secretly against the "offender," trying to undermine and tear down what they're doing, while acting like everything's "peachy."

But these are the age-old methods of a world living without God. And if we're still living this way...if we're still planning punishment and carrying it out, we're still stuck in the ways of a world at war. And God implores us to leave those ways behind forever. Listen to where he's moving us from 2 Corinthians 13:11:

11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

Aim for restoration...plan for peace...in all your relationships and in any conflicts that arise. In every conflict we should have a bulls-eye we're shooting at...the bulls-eye of restoring relationship, as opposed to planning punishment to set things right. Aim for restoration as we speak the truth in love...the same love Christ has given to us as he's forgiven our own sins and even paid the penalty for them himself.

Remember that passage we opened with in Romans? Devising evil and using deceit to get what we want is the path to ruin and misery and even bloodshed in some cases. But in contrast, when we plan peace using honesty and love and seeking of God's good purposes above all, we get on the path to JOY. Hmm...Joy OR ruin and misery? Which sounds better to you? Would you say your standard approach to life and to conflict right now is planning peace? That's where the Prince of Peace wants to take you and it's a path that leads to joy when we're willing to take it.

CONCLUSION

So where are you today in living the lifestyle of peace to which Jesus has called each of us? Has the peace you've been given with God permeated deep enough within you yet to begin bringing peace into your relationships with other people? Are you sharing the peace he's given to you with other people? Are you offering the grace and forgiveness he's given you to them? Or are you like the ungrateful servant whose enormous debt had been forgiven, but who then went and tried to strangle another person who owed him a much lesser amount?

Does living this life of peace seem way out of reach, or not possible in your real life? *Can you see yourself moving from serving self to serving Christ in all you do? From pride and power trips to humility and gentleness? From planning punishment to planning peace?* I guarantee you this is where God wants to lead his sons and daughters and his Spirit is ready to give us everything we need to live this way...and JOY awaits, my friends, instead of ruin and misery.

Let's believe the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:9:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

That's what I want to be called: a son of God who's known for making peace! And I trust you do too!

Romans 14:17-19

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Shall we pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding in all we do? We'll be serving Christ instead of ourselves when we do and it will be greatly pleasing to God and the impact on our relationships will be profound and God-glorifying. We'll be functioning as the true body of Christ bringing his peace to a world at war. Will we always be able to make peace with others? Most definitely not. But as far as it depends on us, we will. We'll be aiming for peace in every situation... and we will be at peace knowing we're doing our part and are ready at a moment's notice to do whatever's necessary to fully restore the relationship when the other person is ready. Let's live the life of peace made possible by Jesus, the Prince of Peace!

For Additional Study and Application

Read Romans 3:10-18. What are some of the characteristics of the life of war and what's the underlying issue? What's most important to people living this lifestyle?

What would it look like in your life if your top priority everywhere you go becomes serving Christ? How might that affect the way you conduct yourself at work, at home, at church?

Read James 3:13-18. What are the characteristics of earthly wisdom and what does it lead to? What are the characteristics of heavenly wisdom and what does it lead to?

Why are pride and power trips so destructive to relationships? To our walk with God? What are some ways we can tell if we're living in humility in our relationships? In our walk with God?

For Additional Study and Application

Describe a time in your life when you planned and carried out punishment for someone who had hurt or offended you. What would it have looked like in that situation to plan peace instead of plan punishment?

Reflect on the following verses: *Matthew 5:9; Romans 14:17-19*. Spend time in prayer asking God to make you a peacemaker.