

# Pursuing Peace

## What is Peace?

The writer to the Hebrews said “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Of the 13 activities or things we are told to pursue, peace and righteousness are mentioned the most frequently. Rom 14:19, 2 Tim 2:22, Heb 12:14, 1 Peter 3:11, and Psalm 34:12-14 all instruct God’s people to pursue peace or the things that make for peace. These passages all refer to peace between people rather than peace with God. Since this is so, how do we go about pursuing peace with others?

Promoting peace between people has two aspects to it. On the positive side, we will be looking at the things that make for peace. Peace is much more than the absence of conflict or war. It is a positive word referring to harmony and agreement between individuals and nations. It can also refer to a state of well being, health, and general welfare. Peace is identified as a fruit of the Holy Spirit in Gal. 5:22 and as a defining characteristic of “the wisdom from above” in James 3:17. So peace comes from God, but can be and should be experienced in our lives. Paul begins many of his letters with the greeting “Grace and peace to you”. The command to pursue peace only makes sense if peace is in some measure attainable. “That which makes for peace” means that peace is not an automatic condition, but rather that, for there to be peace, certain preconditions must exist and be met.

It is possible that peace may be imposed by force when certain conditions are met. Eccl 3:8 says that “there is a time for war and a time for peace.” Sometimes peace is neither possible nor even lawful and proper! There is no peace for the wicked says the prophet Isaiah. God will one day enforce His rule over creation and destroy His adversaries, confining them to the Lake of Fire, but this does not mean that He will be at peace with Satan and rebellious people. He will forcibly end the conflict and establish peace in His Kingdom between Himself and His people.

## **Resolving Conflict (Conflict is Inevitable in a Fallen World)**

Because of our sinful natures, pursuing peace will also involve studying conflict resolution methods that we are commanded by the Word of God to do. Many of you who were in Level 1 counseling class will be familiar with these methods. This is the second side to pursuing peace.

Conflict is inevitable in a fallen world. Even as people who have been saved by God's grace, we are often in conflict with each other. We have not yet been glorified so sin is still very much active in our lives. None of us sees the end as God sees. Our vision is limited and we have a tendency to mistake our own opinions for the Wisdom of God. None of us is fully free from self centeredness. Even our best acts can be contaminated by hidden agendas and impure motives. Even when we truly mean well and try to do our best, we discover that we may lack the power or resources to do the good we desire. Perhaps most frustrating are the times we try to do the right thing and are misunderstood. So what are we to do?

Apparently God has a purpose, even in our conflicts. It is in these struggles that we have *opportunity* to learn to put into practice many of God's commands regarding how we are to treat one another. Conflict is an opportunity to glorify God. Paul instructs the Corinthians in (1 Cor 10:31) "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Peter makes the same point when he says "Who-ever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies-in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:11). "In all things" and "whatever you do" we are to make our aim to glorify God.

God provides *adequate instruction* in His Word to resolve conflict. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:16-17). The problem is that God's methods differ drastically from those of this world. We will need to learn from God's Word.

Pursuing peace is certainly a good work that we should be equipped for, and Scripture is profitable for helping us unlearn the world's ways while it teaches us God's ways.

### **Biblical Conflict Resolution is not Avoidance of Conflict (What Conflict Resolution is not: Avoidance)**

One common false solution to conflicts in this world is simply "avoidance". Perhaps the most common avoidance technique we use is *to deny that* a problem or conflict exists. Another way of doing the same thing is to minimize what is really a significant matter. "Oh, it's not that important. It's just a little thing." To be fair, there are many "little things" that should be and can be righteously overlooked, and forgotten. But all too often we are uncertain, or unwilling and sometimes afraid to deal with serious matters. A very clear negative example from the Scriptures is found in the family life of Eli, the step father of the prophet Samuel in 1 Sam. 2:10-34. Eli knew that that what his sons were doing was sinful, but rather than discipline them, he merely talked with them. Verse 25 tells us that the sons "would not listen to the voice of their father" and suggests that this was their habit, developed over a long time. Eli's continual refusal to discipline his sons led to their death. Here, denial allowed time to make things much worse. We also see that it was not only the sons who were judged. Verse 29 makes it clear that Eli, himself, is going to be judged for honoring his sons above God. Eli preferred the absence of conflict in his family, a counterfeit peace, over God's commands. This is an easy pattern of living to fall into.

*Nor is running* from a problem usually helpful, though in some situations it may be necessary. David's flight from Saul, as well as Paul's escape from Damascus may have been necessary. Running away from the person with whom you are having a conflict is a legitimate response only when it is presently impossible to resolve the conflict in a constructive manner (1 Sam. 19:9-10), but in milder circumstances, running away solves nothing and also permits problems to fester.

*Suicide* is an extreme form of avoidance and is never an acceptable solution to a problem. Saul feared defeat in battle and ordered his armor bearer to slay him. This was wrong and his armor bearer

would not, for he feared greatly. Saul then took matters into his own hands and, Saul took his own sword and fell upon it.”

## **Biblical Conflict Resolution is not Attacking my Adversary (What Conflict Resolution is not: Attacking)**

Another method promoted by the false wisdom of this world is to attack the one with whom I am in conflict with. Those who must win at all costs may resort to assault and physical violence. *Murder* lies at one end of this kind of behavior. We don't have to actually commit the literal act in order to be guilty of the same sin if we carry *hatred, anger, or contempt* in our hearts. It should be obvious that Biblical conflict resolution never involves this kind of conduct. Biblical conflict resolution includes total abstinence from *verbal* attacks such as *slander* and *gossip*, or from attempts to destroy another financially or professionally. The Jews successfully used slander to get Stephen arrested which ultimately led to his murder by a lawless mob.

Going to court is a form of physical attack. Romans 13:1-5 declares that governing authorities are established by God and thus have legitimate functions. However, Biblical conflict resolution is rarely found in the civil courts of Law. 1 Cor 6:1-8 makes it clear that it is an admission of defeat for a Christian to take another Christian to court. It would be better to be willingly wronged and to accept the loss, than to display our lack of love and wisdom before unbelievers. The Biblical norm is to stay out of court. Jesus warns us to be reconciled quickly with our opponents rather than go before a judge Matt. 5:23-26 says.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

## **Biblical Conflict Resolution Begins Privately (Biblical Methods of Reconciliation Personal)**

Biblical methods of reconciliation begin with personal (private) - one on one effort. Many of the things that frustrate Christians about other Christians are unimportant and petty. Proverbs 19:11 says “Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook and offense.” Many times the best thing to do with the many day to day irritations is to quietly *overlook the offense*. When an offense is frequently repeated or when a personal offense is too serious to overlook, discussion is appropriate. We are also commanded to “go to our brother” when we become aware that we have offended another rather than presume on their forgiveness. Such matters should be resolved through *confession* or *loving confrontation*. Prov 28:13 promises compassion to those who confess and forsake their transgressions. When we are the ones confronting a sinning brother, Gal. 6:1-3 must be kept continually before our thoughts.

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.”

We are not better than our sinning brother or sister! We are capable of the same, and worse, offenses. If we think differently, Paul says we are deceiving ourselves. We are to be gentle, meek, rather than overbearing, and our goal is restoration of the relationships involved, not punishment.

Phil 2:4 requires each of us to “not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” When material issues are involved, such as money or property, solutions should be negotiated to meet the interests of all parties. The example of how Daniel handled the matter of eating forbidden food is very insightful (Dan 1:1-16). The commander had a very real concern that granting Daniel’s request might make him look as if he was incompetent, or worse, insubordinate. In

such a case he might be executed. Daniel's solution sought to address the commander's concerns, and God honored his effort. In all of these matters, we are to treat people as we would want to be treated were we in their shoes (Matt 7:12).

### **Biblical Conflict Resolution Can Include Assistance (Additional People Brought In)**

Only after private approaches to resolving the conflict have failed, should we seek assistance from additional people. This is important. Mediation is an approved Biblical approach in Matt 18:16 after unsuccessfully trying the personal approaches. Mediation can help with *communication problems* and provide the benefit of an additional mind for *exploring solutions* to the problem. A mediator does not have authority to impose a solution – they give counsel only. The presence of a mediator can also be helpful when there is a danger of emotions running high.

Another form of assisted conflict resolution is arbitration. 1 Cor 6:1-9 describes such a process for those cases when you and your opponent cannot resolve the matter. An arbitrator is a person of wisdom who is brought in by both parties. Both parties agree to the process and agree to abide by the decision made by the arbitrator. He listens and, after considering all the information presented, makes a decision that is *binding* on the parties.

If there has been unsuccessful private and mediated efforts at resolving the conflict church leaders should become involved. When a Christian party refuses to do what is right and just, the church formally intervenes to promote *repentance and reconciliation*. Christian people do not always do the right things, even with help. This fact does not free us of the need to obey God's commands regarding restoring our brothers and sisters in Christ. These are people for whom the Son of God suffered and died for. And it is Jesus Christ who tells us what to do in Matthew 18. Nor does it give us the authority to disregard the painful process of removing an unrepentant person from fellowship. Yes, it is painful, and, yes, it is necessary. There is more at stake here than merely the unrepentant sinner. "A little leaven

leavens the whole lump *of dough*” (1 Cor 5:6). The whole church will suffer if the unrepentant individual is not removed.

### **Basic Principals of Biblical Conflict Resolution (Basic Principals)**

The basic principals in Biblical conflict resolution are as follows. First and foremost, conflict is an *opportunity* to do good. Earlier we reminded ourselves that whatever we do, we are to do to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). God has a purpose in these conflicts. He will be honored when we approach conflict in the way His Word prescribes. We have an opportunity to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 6:1-2, 10) during conflict. We can do well to our brothers and sisters even in the midst of disharmony. “While we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” We need to exhort each other during such times that “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.” (Rom 8:28-29) This passage tells us that “all things” including conflicts provide an opportunity to grow and become more like Christ. We will grow in Christ as we obey these principals.

It is very important to remember that this conflict did not catch God by surprise. When seeking to resolve a disagreement and then running into seemingly overwhelming roadblocks, it is wise to reflect on what God wants me to see about my own heart. What do I believe? Is it Biblical and correct? Am I, perhaps, the one who does not understand or who has misapplied some Biblical principal? Conflict provides opportunities for hidden motives and agendas to be revealed. What is it that I really want? Am I willing to make a bad decision in order to get what I want? When there is conflict, I must determine what part I have played. This will require confession to those I have sinned against. When I discover that someone has something against me, I need to go to them. I may be guilty of sinful attitudes such as jealousy and selfish ambition (James 3:14). My attitude may have been displayed in slanderous or



malicious words (Col 3:8) or in other sinful acts. Whatever it is, confession needs to be specific. A general confession of a “bad attitude” reconciles no one. This is not genuine repentance. I have grieved God in sinning against my brother. What is required is a change of heart leading to change of action.

When I am the offended person, I must go to my brother – in private first, then as required, I may bring additional people to help. Minor offenses are to be overlooked and forgiven (Prov 19:11). But when someone’s sins are too serious to overlook, I am to go to them privately. When talking to the offender we must strive to communicate. Try to build up the other person rather than tear down. It is wrong to assume every offense is committed with malice. Often we are just simply thoughtless. Clarify what is being said. Listen and understand the other’s points. This may take more than one conversation. Do not assume that you should get assistance after one unsuccessful attempt at reconciliation. We need to pursue peace! It takes effort on our part.

If personal efforts (note the plural) do not succeed, take others along. Clarify the facts. We all have blind spots so we can all profit from good counsel and fresh ideas. Also, the presence of another person will tend to promote self control during what might be a difficult discussion.

Only after failing to resolve the matter with additional people, should one bring the matter to the church. Church leaders are to be approached first, and then if they see the necessity, the whole church might be brought in. The goal of restoration needs to be continually kept before those seeking to resolve the conflict. Church leaders are to encourage repentance, justice, and forgiveness. Peace is simply not possible without these things. When there is no repentance righteous restoration is impossible, Matt. 18:17-18 tells us to treat the offender as an unbeliever. We do not despise an unbeliever. On the contrary we seek to restore and lead them to repentance. In this way we honor God and preserve the purity of the church.

However, by Gods grace, people do respond correctly and in many instances restoration is possible. God gives grace to those who humble themselves (James 4:6, Matt. 23:12). When this happens we truly need to be reconciled – forgive and restore. Eph 4:1-6 says this is very important.

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

We are to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” It takes work. Take note of the reason commanded for such diligence. There is one body and one Spirit. Those who are true Christians are part of one Body, This unity is important enough that Jesus took note of it twice during His last day with His disciples.

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 13:35 and 17:23)

Our world, Jesus said, will learn something from a visible display of Christian love and unity. Our love for another will testify to them that we are truly His disciples. Our unity will have an impact on our outreach and will help convince the world that Jesus was sent from God, the Father.

It is called the unity of the Spirit. Whatever our differences and our sins against one another are, we have the same Holy Spirit dwelling within, cleansing, guiding, and empowering. The children of God have a single hope, a confident expectation of good, and a guarantee of righteousness before a holy God, before Whom the whole world will one day tremble. This will be realized when Jesus returns. Those who I need to be reconciled to are of the same faith, baptized into the same Christ, and worship

the same God Who is over all. The unity of God in this passage, as Spirit, Lord, and Father is to be our example.

In working through restoration, allowance must be made for the fact that major hurts take time to heal. The offended and the offender may never become “best friends”. We must be especially careful not to seek to *punish* or *compel* the repentant person to somehow earn our forgiveness. Col 3:13 teaches us that “just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” If issues require negotiations, we are to look out for the needs of others rather than our own (Phil 2:3-4).

In contrast with the human tendency to seek revenge, we are instructed to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21). Our lives testify to the unbelievers: “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:12) We are not to resort to *worldly tactics*.

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We Destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.” (2 Cor 10:3-5).

Resolving conflict God’s way and pursuing peace is part of growing in Christ. It is an area in which the Holy Spirit takes His Sword and applies it to our hearts. As Pastor Russ taught us in (Heb. 4:12-13) last Sunday “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Heb. 4:12-13) All of us needs this work of exposure, so our thoughts and the intentions of our hearts are taken captive to the obedience of Christ.

In closing I believe the idea of pursuing peace is captured in Paul’s exhortation to the Romans in 12:18; “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” It is for the glory of God. It is

part of God's process of conforming us to the image of His beloved Son, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

