

“The Peacemakers”

Introduction: Twenty years ago, journalist Chris Hedges set out to determine whether there have been any sustained periods of peace on the human record. Defining war as any active conflict that has claimed more than 1,000 lives, Hedges reviewed 3,400 years of human history and discovered that just 268 years of that history were war-free. In other words, over 92% of recorded history has been marked by violent conflict. And the last two decades have done nothing but make those figures even worse!

We live in a world in which peace is frustratingly elusive. Especially in the advent season we feel the tension between the declaration that the Prince of Peace has come, yet we are still surrounded by chaos and conflict. We yearn for the peace that he, Jesus, brings to be here in its fullness.

Importantly, while such yearning for peace is appropriate, this Prince actually calls us to more. As a part of the Beatitudes, the introductory comments to the Sermon on the Mount that we’ve been exploring, we see that when the kingdom of God gets ahold of us, we’ll not only yearn for peace, but we’ll also seek to be peace makers. It is then that we begin to live into the family likeness – children of God.

I. In the Flow

A. Before we think about peace in particular, it might be useful to see where we’ve come in the overall flow of the Beatitudes. As we’ve said, these aren’t 8 blessings from which we get to pick and choose our favorites! Like the fruit of the Spirit, all of them are to be a growing part of the work God is doing in his kingdom people.

Those who are poor in spirit understand their spiritual bankruptcy and consequent need for God.

They begin to mourn their own brokenness as well as that in the world caused by sin.

They experience a desire to be used by God—to be meek—entrusting him with the reigns of their life.

They find their appetites beginning to change, that a hunger and thirst for right relationships begins to direct their desires.

They seek to offer mercy, extending pardon and provision to those in need, regardless of the reason for the need or the address of the needy.

They experience greater purity of vision as Jesus becomes “taller” and the idols of their lives “smaller.”

And they start not just to yearn for peace, but to seek ways to actually make it.

(There is one more – the reality that those who begin to live this flow, challenging the “normal” way of doing things, will experience persecution; not everyone will appreciate or like what we’re standing for. But we’ll wait for the New Year to think more about that!)

II. What Is Peace?

A. Now it shouldn’t surprise us that making peace has to do with taking on the family likeness, that it is to be a part of our character as citizens of the kingdom of God, because peace is a part of the

character of the King, Jesus. Think of the familiar advent prophecy of Isaiah, linking peace with the child to be born for us (Isa. 9:6-7):

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

Then, at the end of his life, (Palm Sunday), the promise of the prophet Zechariah is read. (Zech. 9:9-10):

See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey . . . I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

For a king to ride a horse meant he was coming to make war. To ride a donkey meant he was coming to make peace. From beginning to end, the life of Jesus is about making peace, a peace he calls his followers to join him in making, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts as we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love (Col. 3:12-15).

B. So, if we're not just to yearn for peace but to seek to make it, what is it? In general, I think most people tend to think of peace as either peace of mind – a sense of inner tranquility as you gaze quietly at the ocean or a mountain range. Or we tend to think of peace as the absence of war. Certainly, peace as the biblical writers talk about it includes both of these things. But it is more comprehensive. Behind the word Jesus uses for peace is the Hebrew word and concept of *shalom*. *Shalom* signifies well-being, wholeness, and flourishing. *Shalom* happens when all is running according to the way the Creator designed it to run. *Shalom* designates harmony in the four principal relationships we have in life – with God, with ourselves, with our neighbor, and with creation. When those relationships are working well, there is *shalom*, there is peace.

C. Here are some pictures of *shalom*:

1. *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Ro. 5:1).* The hostility or dissonance that sin causes has been taken away. Harmony with God - *shalom* - is the result.
2. *The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace (Ro. 8:6).* Inner peace, harmony - *shalom* - comes as we keep in step with the Spirit, walking and living God's way.
3. *You are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God's people and members of his household . . . for he himself is our peace who has made the two groups one (Eph. 2:19, 14).* Gentiles now living in harmony - *shalom* - with Jews, the dividing wall of hostility having been removed by Jesus.
4. *The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain . . . you soften [the land] with showers and bless its crops . . . the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing (Ps. 65:9-13).* A picture of creation working well - *shalom* - when properly cared for (cf. Ge. 2:15).

III. How Does Peace Happen?

A. If we're to be makers of such peace, how does it happen? I think we best begin by returning to the fields with the shepherds and hearing the angel choir sing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven

and on earth peace...” Peace on earth, notice, begins with God in the heavenlies. Therefore, the first piece, the scaffolding, we might say, needed to make peace on earth, begins by putting the God of heaven on the throne of our life and giving him the glory. It is bowing our knee before him and praying that he would melt any resistance we might have toward him, our Creator, and accept our place as creatures.

Illustration: In a speech he gave at Stanford University a few years ago, Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czech Republic, ended his description of the troubling world situation in this way: “Given its fatal incorrigibility, humanity probably will have to go through many more Rwandas and Chernobyls before it understands how unbelievably shortsighted a human being can be who has forgotten that he is not God.” Making peace includes acknowledging God and desiring to walk with him.

B. The second piece needed for peace making is that of sacrifice. It is recognizing that the cross is both the source, as well as the course, of peace. We heard Paul make this clear to the Colossian church, declaring that Jesus, the one through whom all things were created, and the one in whom all things hold together, is also the one who came to reconcile all things – to make harmony possible in all our relationships. This he did through his blood, shed on the cross. Shed blood was needed because, if we are going to follow Jesus into the realm of peacemaking, our hearts need to be cleansed. We must have hearts that are willing to love our enemies, to offer forgiveness and sacrifice our desire for revenge, to swallow our pride and admit where we’ve been wrong, to make financial restitution where necessary, to resist our inclination to resort to violence.

Illustration: In Jesus’ day, there was a group of vigilante Jews who were part of a resistance movement that sought to bring their Roman overlords to justice through violence. They were called Zealots, and Jesus affirmed nothing about the way they desired to bring about change. He sought, instead, to turn them from retaliation to reconciliation. While we may need to wrestle at times with whether a war is just or not, there is no room for vigilantes in the kingdom of God, then, or now, for those who are seeking to walk and make peace in the way of Jesus.

C. A third piece needed to make peace is simply patience, or, we might say, perspective. I think this is behind Paul’s statement: *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (Ro. 12:18). Peacemaking is hard! Not everyone will want to join in. And no matter how much we might want to, we cannot force Putin to sit down at the bargaining table! But it is worth asking: Given your areas of responsibility and influence—family, work, school, church—what even small steps can you take to pursue peace in those realms? Identify such and ask the God of peace to help you take those steps.

As we do, let us take them resting in the promise of God that one day the tools of destruction will be transformed into tools of cultivation, that our chariots and warhorses will be no more, that our swords and spears will be turned into plowshares and pruning hooks, and that there will subsequently be no end to the peaceful reign of the Prince of Peace. Amen.