

## Living as a Community of Peace

Scripture Text: Romans 12:14-18

### Introduction

Over two hundred years ago, the English colonies in North America wanted freedom. There had been a “long train of abuses and usurpations” that led the colonists to throw off the bonds of English brotherhood and declare themselves “free and independent States.” The Fourth of July is about celebrating that seminal moment in our American history where our forefathers decided that they ought to be free of tyranny and chart a new course as a nation. The colonists fought for that freedom and independence which we now enjoy, and for which we should be extremely grateful. Some, however, did not want to fight for that freedom. Some were happy to tolerate those abuses, or either, agreed with Great Britain’s treatment of the colonies. Many just wanted peace.

Just about everyone wants peace. I say “just about everyone” because there are those who seem to not really want it. There are some who are war mongers. There are some who are backbiters. There are divisive people who like to stir up trouble. Then, there are those who want peace but either are not willing or not able to work for it. But peace does not come easily or cheaply. It takes commitment. It takes work. I once read a bumper sticker on a car that read, “If you want peace, work for justice.” The late Pope Paul VI actually wrote that in 1972. The pope may have meant something else about working for justice, but the part I noted was that peace does not happen on its own. We have to want it and we have to work for it. I would say that most people want peace. We want to live, work and play where there is peace. But how badly do you want it?

Last week, we read about the marks of a follower of Jesus Christ. We read about the church being a community and saw that this community ought to be defined by love. This love should not to be fake, but ought to be genuine. At the same time, it is a love that also hates what is evil. This love is also a kind of family love that is selfless and puts the needs of others first. It is a kind of love that motivates us to passionately serve the Lord. It is also the kind of love that is hopeful, patient and prayerful in all things. This love opens our eyes to the needs of others and compels us to help those we can. Basically, it is the kind of love that God has shown us and which He desires for us to show each other. Today’s passage continues that thread and speaks about another important aspect of being a Christian community. We are to be a *community of peace*. We have to find ways to lovingly and peacefully live with and interact with others.

### Bless Those Who Hurt You

There are going to be people who hurt you. There are people who do not have your best interest in mind. Some of those people will be your family or your friends. Unfortunately, some of those people will even be within the church. How should you respond to those who hurt you? Look at Paul’s statement.

***Romans 12:14<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.***

This can be really difficult to do. When someone hurts you, what do you typically want to do? You might want to hurt them back. When someone hurts us, our natural inclination is to pay that person back — eye for eye and tooth for tooth. That is not the way God desires His children to behave, though. In fact, this passage not only says we ought to resist retaliation, but we ought to actually bless the person. Stephen provided an excellent example of this godly attitude when as he was being stoned, he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” In the midst of being killed, Stephen looked up to his persecutors and asked God to bless them. Paul’s statement in this verse is very much like something Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount. Concerning the issue of loving one’s neighbor and hating one’s enemy, Jesus said the following.

**Matthew 5:43–44** <sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

Not only should we love others, including those who are our enemies, we should pray for them. When someone is being hateful to you, saying something mean to you, or hurting you in some way, pray for that person. Ask God to bless that person. This might be hard to do, in fact, I know it is hard to do. It is contrary to how we naturally think and feel, but it ought not be our nature. If we know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and are following Him, we ought to have a new nature — a Christ nature. The old nature says, “Curse them”; God says, “Ask me to bless them.” Blessing and praying for those who persecute you is a natural outflow of *genuine love* for others, that is itself a natural outflow of God’s love for us. So pray for them and pray that God gives you the strength to respond in a Christ-like manner. That will honor God.

### **Rejoice and Weep with Others**

What do you want others to do when something good happens to you? You probably want them to be happy with you. What do you want others to do when something bad happens to you? You will probably want them to grieve with you. The old adage is true, “Misery loves company.” That is true of genuine happiness, too. If we are happy, we will want to share that with others. Part of being a community is sharing our experiences, whether they are good or bad. Look at the following verse.

**Romans 12:15** <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

The Christian life is not one person against the whole world, but one great family living together and caring for one another. If you live your faith in relative isolation, you are missing an incredible source of strength and joy. When one person is doing well we ought to all do well. When something good happens to one person, we ought to all rejoice. We should never be jealous or not care. If something good has happened in someone else’s life, let us celebrate it together. On the other hand, when one person is suffering, we ought to all grieve with that person. When one person is suffering some loss or enduring some pain, we ought to suffer along with that person. Jewish people would express grief by tearing their clothing, wearing sackcloth, and fasting. Mourners

would also sing or chant a dirge. Grieving was a community affair. Rejoicing and mourning with others shows genuine love for one another.

This verse is similar to what Paul told us to do in chapter twelve of his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul described how the church is supposed to work together. God has brought us together to be His holy people. He has fashioned the Church with various members who support one another in both the good times and the bad. Look at the following passage.

***1 Corinthians 12:26*** <sup>26</sup> *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

Paul called the Church a “body”, because we are like a physical body with various members. The members of our physical bodies either suffer together or do well together. When my arm hurts, my whole body reacts. When my head hurts, my whole body hurts with it. When that pain goes away, my whole body is relieved. When I fill my belly with some wonderful food, my whole body rejoices. Like our physical bodies, God has composed the church with many members that make up a living organism. Each member ought to suffer and rejoice with the other members. The church ought not treat other members like *amputated* limbs. The only time a part of the body is amputated or removed is when it is diseased or damaged and risks harming the rest of the body. Outside of that, we need all of our members working together to be a healthy body.

### **Live in Harmony and Humility**

Something else this passage says is for us to have a harmonious life. Most husbands want this, or should want this. The first marital advice I received was to say, “Yes dear. You are right dear. You are always right!” Others might say, “Happy wife, happy life.” In marriage, we want our lives to be harmonious. The same can be said of church. We should want our church life and our relationships with one another to be harmonious. Sometimes they are not, though. Again, Paul reminds us of something that is needed to live together in this community of faith and love. It is humility. Look at the following.

***Romans 12:16*** <sup>16</sup> *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.*

What is the main thing Paul was saying here? Do not be prideful. The topic of pride keeps coming up. This is the third time in this chapter that Paul mentioned something about pride and humility. It must be important. Why is it? Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall (Proverbs 16:18). Is it possible to be peaceful with others when you are prideful? No! Pride sows the seeds of discord. It is the enemy of peace. The tendency to regard oneself as worthy of preferential treatment is something very common. Just about all personal conflict, from minor squabbles to international wars, comes from an idea that we are better than others or that we deserve something. Pride does not consider others more importantly. Pride exalts self and lowers others. So Paul exhorted us to “live in harmony with one another.”

Another way to look at this is that we have the same mindset. We are one in purpose and mission. We are united in serving our Lord. This unity is not because we necessarily accommodate another person's point of view, but it is more a result of striving together to understand God's way of thinking. In marital counseling, I counsel the couple to consider marriage like a triangle with the two of them on the bottom angles of the triangle and God at the top. At the bottom, they are the furthest from God as well as from each other. The closer they each get to God, the closer they will become to one another. The same can be said of the church. The closer we are to God, and His will, the closer we come to one another. Therefore, Paul admonished his readers not to be proud since it is pride more than anything else that destroys the harmony of the body.

The second part of verse sixteen is interesting. Translators disagree what this part of the verse means. Some take it to mean "associate with the lowly," such as ordinary people. Others take it to mean "ordinary or humble tasks". Which is it? I am not sure, but in either case the intent here is for us to humble ourselves and consider other people (or things) as important. There are both humble tasks and ordinary people that need our attention. To withdraw from either is to allow pride to control us. It is a sign of worldliness when members of the Church become snobbish and refuse to either do menial tasks or to be around people they consider beneath them. The example we ought to follow is Jesus Christ, who left His throne in heaven to associate with us poor, wretched and lowly sinners. Are we doing the same? Are we being humble in what we do and who we associate? If not, then your prayer should be for God to humble you.

### **Live Peaceably With Others...If Possible**

It is comforting to know that God understands us. Paul was not living in some fantasy world when he wrote this letter. Paul did not tell us to do a bunch of things believing that it was in our power to accomplish everything in the name of peace. Paul recognized that sometimes you can do all the right things and some people just will not accept you. You can say or do what you should and some people will still cause trouble. Some people are just difficult. Maybe you are one of those people. Look at Paul's advice.

***Romans 12:17–18*** <sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

We have already been told to bless those who persecute us, therefore verse seventeen may be a similar statement but in a different way. Paul told us to not repay evil for evil. When someone wrongs us or says something hurtful, are we to retaliate? No! This verse is another statement that is similar to something Jesus once said. Jesus said that if someone strikes you on one cheek, you should give them the other one (Matthew 5:39). We are not to pay someone back with evil. That is the natural, but sinful, response. Such conduct only escalates conflict. It is like throwing gasoline on the fire, which only erupts and causes further damage. Evil only begets more evil. Before a situation gets out of hand, stop the chain of violence and seek peace. Those who follow Jesus Christ should do all that is in their power to live at peace with others.

Verse eighteen suggests, however, that living peaceably with others might not always be possible. Paul recognized that even if we make all the effort, there may not be peace. It is likely that you can do all that you can to be at peace with someone and they will just not let you. In those situations, you should ask yourself these questions: Have I done all that I can do to bring peace in this situation? Have I loved this person in the way Christ expects me to love this person? Is there anything I am doing or not doing that is causing this situation to escalate? If you have asked those questions and you are at a loss, ask God for grace to persevere. Ask Him to help you not run away, but to keep engaging in love with that hard-to-love person. Ask Him to change the heart of that difficult person. God will be honored as you persevere and you will find deeper satisfaction as you seek to love others as Christ loved us when we were His enemies.

## Conclusion

In closing, the common response to being hurt by someone else is to retaliate, but that should not be our response. Christians are called to serve and to minister God's grace to a lost and hostile world. We are to display God's grace and love to others, that He has already shown to us. Just look to the example our Lord and Savior gave us. Jesus came to His enemies in order to save them. When mankind deserved judgement and death, Jesus did not curse His enemies, but He blessed them. He humbled Himself, putting off the riches and power of heaven, and came as a lowly human baby boy born in a dirty manger. Though mankind persecuted Him and killed Him on a cross, Jesus did not repay us according to our evil, but according to His amazing grace. He did what was honorable in the sight of God and man. Through His death, burial and resurrection, He brought peace on this earth and made it possible for all of us to enjoy peace forever. In fact, Jesus is our peace. Look at the following passage.

***Ephesians 2:13–14*** <sup>13</sup> *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility*

Jesus conquered evil on the cross and purchased peace for us. Do you have that peace? If not, you can have it. What if you are not a very peaceful person? Can God help you? Yes! God is the One who can convert even a Saul who persecuted the church. If God can do that for Saul, He can do that for you. You just need to receive God's grace and forgiveness. The offer is available to whosoever will turn from their sin and turn to Jesus Christ. You can know the peace of God by accepting the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, and confessing Him as your Lord and Savior.

For those who have trusted in Jesus Christ, maybe you need help to live out the Gospel of Peace. Maybe you need strength to not retaliate, but to respond like Christ. Turn to Him for strength. Pray that God will give you a Christ-like spirit to love others as He has loved you. Like the hymn, I Need Thee Every Hour, says, no matter the joy or pain, we still need Jesus Christ. He is there for you, always, and His power is there for the asking. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!