

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Peace

Romans 12:14-21

Matthew 18:15-20

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As we continue our in-depth study of the fruit of the Spirit, today we come to the characteristic of peace. The word “peace” in the world means many things. It has the connotation of the cessation of hostilities between warring nations – peace. It can refer to an inner sense of calmness in a person – peace. It may be used to describe the still water on a pre-dawn mountain lake – peace. It might describe the undisturbed quiet in the house while everyone else is asleep – peace.

In the Bible, the word “peace” also has many connotations. In the ancient Hebrew of the Old Testament, the primary word for “peace” is *shalom*. *Shalom* refers to general well-being and prosperity. For the ancient Israelites, and as part of the teaching of the Old Testament, *shalom* is impossible without a right relationship with God; *shalom* cannot be experienced apart from the blessing of God.

The primary New Testament Greek word for “peace” is *εἰρήνη* (*eirēnē*). There are three primary uses of the word in the New Testament, all of which apply at least to some extent in what Paul is describing here as part of the fruit of the Spirit.

The New Testament will refer frequently, especially in the writings of Paul, to “peace with God.” Peace with God refers to the atoning work of Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection. This is the kind of peace that we declare every Sunday in our litany of confession and pardon: We recognize our sinfulness, which estranges us from God. We also recognize that on our own we are not able to restore our relationship with God; we are unable to deliver ourselves from our sin. But God so loves us that he has provided for our redemption through his Son, Jesus Christ. And so as we confess our sin, we also hear and receive assurance of our pardon – In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

That's what peace with God is. It is what Paul means when he says in Ephesians that once “we were dead in the trespasses and sins... But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us... made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.”¹ It is peace with God that enables us to experience the other kinds of peace we find in the New Testament.

The second kind of peace of which the New Testament speaks is the peace of God. The peace of God is the inner calm and tranquility of the soul that is ours when Jesus Christ dwells in our hearts. This is precisely the peace of which Jesus spoke on the night before he died, when he told his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... let not your hearts be troubled, and neither let them be afraid.”² And then on the night of his resurrection when Jesus entered the upper room where his disciples had gathered in fear, Jesus twice spoke these assuring words: “Peace be with you.”³ This is the same peace to which Paul

¹ Ephesians 2:1, 4

² John 14:27

³ John 20:19, 21

refers when he says in Philippians, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”⁴

The peace *of* God is the peace that casts away fear. It is the peace that calms our anxieties, because we are promised that whatever is going on in our lives, God is with us, and he comes to us in love and grace. Billy Graham reminds us that the peace *of* God is like unto that which we find in the 23rd psalm: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the still waters, he restores my soul...”⁵ It is the serenity of soul that comes when we rest confidently in God's presence because God's presence is also God's care for us.

Christopher Wright, in his book on the fruit of the Spirit, says this of the peace of God:

“This is not just a blasé, “happy-go-lucky” attitude. Rather it is a settled trust in God’s Fatherly care and a steady refusal to give in to anxieties. It is an act of will, in which we choose not to worry, but to pray and trust God.”⁶

There is, indeed, something special about the peace we receive from God in the assurance of God's love and salvation.

Certainly the peace we have *with* God and the peace *of* God that fills our heart are both part of what Paul is thinking when he includes peace as part of the fruit of the Spirit. But there's another component here that I think is a bit more in play. It doesn't in any way negate peace *with* God or the peace *of* God; in fact, it depends on those two components of biblical peace for its effectiveness. But I think that the peace of which Paul speaks as part of the fruit of the Spirit is, essentially, peace between one another.

The reasons I think that the peace of the fruit of the Spirit is relational peace are two: First, immediately prior to describing the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control, Paul refers to the works of the flesh – which the fruit of the Spirit are meant to counter and negate. Among the works of the flesh are traits like “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy...”⁷ It seems to me, then, that if we are to pursue the fruit of the Spirit as the answer to the works of the flesh, then the peace that is included in the fruit of the Spirit must be the kind of peace that effectively addresses enmity, jealousy, strife, dissension, and so on.

The second reason is that the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit all manifest themselves in relationship with other people. “Joy” might be an exception, since it is mainly a disposition, but even that plays out in one's relationship with others. It is also true that when one has found peace *with* God, and when one experiences the peace *of* God, then a natural out-working of those two types of peace will be the pursuit of peace with others. In fact, Paul says this precisely in 2 Corinthians, when he reminds us that as new creations in Christ, we are given the ministry of reconciliation – peace.

At the very beginning of the 18th chapter of Matthew, someone asks Jesus a question about greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus answers by giving several teachings on what greatness in the kingdom looks like: it looks like the innocent faith and trust of a child; it

4 Philippians 4:7

5 Psalm 23:1-2

6 Wright, Christopher J. H.. *Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit: Growing in Christlikeness* (Kindle Locations 720-722). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

7 Galatians 5:20-21a

looks like going out of our way not to make a person stumble in sin; it looks like rejoicing in forgiveness of the lost sheep (which, of course, aren't really sheep at all, but wayward sinners like you and me).

And greatness in the kingdom looks like a person who goes to great trouble to reconcile with the one who has offended them. Only when all options have been exhausted and the offender refuses to repent, are we to cease seeking reconciliation over separation.

As a side note, I want to address what Jesus says in the 18th - 20th verses in that chapter of Matthew, because I think that the verses are often misunderstood or taken out of context. Jesus says, "if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven..." And people have taken that to mean that all we have to do is find someone who wants what we want, and all our prayers will be answered with a resounding "Yes." But that's not what Jesus is saying here; at least I don't think that's what he's saying here. Because Jesus is talking about people coming together in reconciliation; and when people who are separated by conflict can find a way to come together in peace and reconciliation, then God will honor that peace.

I do believe that God listens to our prayers and answers them. But we do not have the power to manipulate God's answer to our prayers. God's answer to our prayers is always in accordance to God's infinite wisdom, power, and love.

But, back to peace. Jesus makes it clear that peace is always worth pursuing; in fact, seeking peace is to be the default response to conflict.

In most of Paul's letters, the first part has to do with our salvation – what God has done for us in Christ. Then he devotes the second part to encouraging his readers to live out the implications of the new life we have in Christ. That's where we find ourselves in the passage from the 12th chapter of Romans this morning. If you read what Paul says in that chapter, then you will see that seeking peace with those who are in conflict with us or who are in disagreement with us is indispensable to the living out of the gospel.

"Live in harmony with one another," Paul says. "...do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."⁸

I think Paul realizes that it is basic human nature to strike back when we are struck, to lash out when we are hurt, to put up a wall of separation defined by differences and disagreements and enmity. He knows that is our first impulse.

But with Christ in our hearts we are different. We are new creations. What was the way of life for us is no longer the way of life for us. Instead of lashing out at others, we are to look for ways to draw them unto us; instead of striking back, we are to embrace in love; instead of dividing and separating, we are to seek oneness – unity.

In a later section of Romans, Paul gives a practical example of what it looks like to seek peace with others. The church in Rome was divided over whether or not food that had been sacrificed to idols was acceptable for Christian consumption. Some were confident that the meat was unclean and was unacceptable. Others were convinced that the real uncleanness was not in the meat, but in the spirit of the person who had sacrificed the animal; thus, the meat could be eaten with a free conscience. We might snicker at this conflict, but it threatened the unity of the Christian church in Rome.

Paul's instruction in this instance was to find a way to live together in the midst of such strong differences. Don't do something that will make your brother or sister stumble, even if

8 Romans 12:14-21, selected verses

you know it's okay. "Pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding," he says.⁹ "Put up with the failings of [others]... Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building them up."¹⁰

Paul does offer this caveat: We are to pursue peace and reconciliation, as long as we do not compromise the gospel. In the instance of the sacrificial meat, Paul gives this reminder: "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval."¹¹ What matters is how we relate to Christ, and how the grace of Christ flows through our lives.

I have heard many times a quote that is attributed as far back as St. Augustine, and it has been adopted by many Christian traditions to set the tone for their debates and their unity. It goes like this: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity." There are some things that we must hold to as non-negotiable. There is a core to which we must adhere – revealed in Scripture, experienced in worship and study, illumined by our tradition. But even when there are some who will not adhere to the core of our faith, still the call to you and me is to deal with them in love, charity.

The call to peace has been poignant in every age. Certainly it is a call that needs to be issued loudly and frequently today, and a call that you and I must – we simply MUST – answer with dedication and purpose. There is a famine of peace in our world today.

Friends, the fruit of the Spirit is the evidence of Jesus Christ alive in our hearts as Lord of our lives. I've said it before, but it bears saying again: the fruit of the Spirit is comprised of all nine traits listed, collectively – not each trait taken individually. If we lack any one of the traits, we lack the fruit of the Spirit. Peace – as are the other traits – is absolutely indispensable.

I want to conclude this morning by reciting a well-known prayer, attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. And then in a moment we will sing that same prayer. The hymn-prayer is not necessarily a familiar tune, but it is singable; you will also note that the hymn is different at the third verse, then returning to its original melody for the fourth verse. But as I offer the prayer, and then as we sing the prayer, I encourage you to make it your prayer as well. Not just today, but every day. Our journey to Christlikeness depends on how well we live in peace.

Let us pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood, as to understand;

9 Romans 14:19

10 Romans 15:1, 2

11 Romans 14:17-18

to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.