

Prayer: O God, send your Spirit upon us and light our path, that we may travel the road you have prepared for us. Having heard your scriptures proclaimed, and your word revealed, enable our hearts and minds to more fully understand your goodness and your grace. Help us break free from ideas that no longer bring life, that we may embrace the life-giving work of your Spirit. Challenge us to forsake paths that ask little of us, and help us resist the evils and temptations of this world, that we may truly follow the way of kingdom living. Amen.

“Reconstructing Your Heart As A Peacemaker”

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So, his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

The Sermon on the Mount is the largest collection of Jesus’ teachings in Scripture. The teachings were not delivered all at once but were woven together as a unified whole in the Gospel of Matthew. Beginning with the well-loved Beatitudes, the Sermon walks us through Jesus’ teachings on the law, worship, and the practice of faith, and concludes with a series of warnings and an admonition to act upon the words of Jesus. Our service of worship progresses through each of these broad movements, creating space to reflect upon the teachings and to practice what Jesus preached.

Let's imagine ourselves that memorable day, sitting with the multitudes on a sunny mountainside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is preaching to the crowd from below, using the steep incline as a natural amphitheater. The soft breeze coming off the water and running up the hillside seems to carry his gentle voice to all of the hundreds of anxious listeners. We are impressed that the Teacher, despite the fact that he is authoritatively delivering a strong message, seems so happy and full of peace. He exudes an interior freedom that allows him to devote himself entirely to serving God and others. The world seems to have no hold on him. Listening to Jesus we are drawn to exclaim, "This man knows what he is talking about." He knows what heaven is like. He knows firsthand that heavenly blessedness far outstrips any worldly happiness I could imagine."

It could feel like we have just heard the most powerful sermon ever delivered, and yet it will take us a while to digest it all. It was absolutely counter-cultural, even shocking. And yet, as challenging as it was, it all seemed to ring true in our hearts. Jesus boldly proposed to us in the Sermon on the Mount a fresh, new roadmap to true happiness and blessedness. All of us have a deep desire to be happy and live-in peace, and we had thought before that we had it all figured out. But Jesus' ways are the very opposite of the ways of the world. He scorns all false beatitudes which make happiness depend on self-expression, license, having a good time, or an attitude of "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you shall die." He knows that the results of these false beatitudes are mental disorders, unhappiness, false hopes, fears and anxieties.

Culture remains divided and in conflict along national, political, racial, and class (among others). How can the church serve as a unifier? The Church needs to give the world a counter-cultural vision of unity and harmony.

The church is a little outpost of the greater kingdom of God, who are headed to a heavenly homeland, and therefore, the way we live and the way we interact with others ought to look different! People ought to see mercy, peace, forgiveness, reasonableness, and say “You Fifth Ave. UMC people aren’t from around here, are you?”

When people see Christians working to resolve conflict, forgiving each other, overlooking minor offenses, and being abundantly kind and merciful, it’s a powerful witness to the watching world. This leading by example is very needed in our day of racism, classism, and other forms of extremism.

Avoidance is actually one of the wrong responses in conflict; with the other being “attack.” Our goal is something else, namely working toward harmony and peace.

This requires some awkward conversations, or some mediation, or perhaps the process of biblical restoration, but this Peacemaking glorifies God and can be a wonderful opportunity for growth.

And each of the Beatitudes describe the ministry of Christ, and God promises a special blessedness for those who demonstrate Christ-likeness. To the Hebrew mind, the heart represented the core being. Solomon warned in Proverbs 4:29, "Above all else guard your heart." Jesus said in Matthew 15:18-19, "It's not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of your heart." Purity was used in reference to approaching the presence of God. Animals, utensils, and the priests had to be pure in order to be accepted into God's presence. Christ-followers are blessed because the blood of Christ has purified our hearts.

Jesus promised the pure would see God. Through purity we gain access to God. Purity allows you to see the unseen and hear the inaudible. God invites you to experience an intimacy with the heavenly Father. He allows pure souls into His holy presence. King David knew the beauty of God's presence and the tragedy of sin robbing his joy, so he prayed for God to create a "clean heart, renew his spirit" that he would not be cast away from God's presence (Ps. 51:10-11).

To the Peacemakers, Jesus promised glorious recognition as "sons (and daughters) of God." Throughout Scripture, we see individuals described as someone's child. In our culture, your last name or Social Security number provides identification, but in ancient Eastern culture people were identified by sonship. To be recognized as God's Son is the highest honors a person can know. You may recall the Pharisees attempted to kill Jesus when he claimed to be God's son (John 8: 48-59). Jesus usually referred to himself as the Son of man, a title used by the prophet Daniel.

Peacemakers receive this special honor because they participate in the same mission as Christ by sharing the gospel with those who are lost. Peacemaking requires the pre-existing condition of conflict. Souls without Christ are at war with God. The Bible describes the unsaved as "enemies of God" (Rom. 5:10) and "children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Jesus did not prescribe political diplomacy, but proclaimed our responsibility to point the way to the Prince of peace. The apostle Paul declared that the saints of God are ambassadors who possess the ministry of reconciliation. I love the description of the peacemakers as those "who builds bridges with wood from an old, rugged cross."

Since we have peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, who has broken down the wall that separated us, we should most gladly pursue peace with all. So that we can have an abundance of peace according to the promises of God. We are uniquely equipped to be peacemakers, because we have received peace that cannot be taken away from us by the world. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. [John 14:27]

Have you heard people incorrectly say, "**Blessed are the peacekeepers....?**" That's a drastic error, even though it's only a slight change in terms. Peacemakers strive to create peace and attempt to reconcile things and people that are at odds with one another.

Peacekeepers, on the other hand, strive to keep peace at all costs.

Solomon, in Proverbs 10:10 (NLT), says, "The troublemaker always has a clever plan and won't look you in the eye, but the one who speaks correction honestly can be trusted to make peace." Peacekeepers, by not acknowledging wrongdoings in an effort to maintain peace, are actually seeking to cause trouble.

Consequently, peacekeepers and peacemakers can actually be considered complete opposites of one another.

Peacekeepers want to maintain things as they are. They often avoid people who are different from themselves in order to keep peace that might be disrupted if they engage others who may view the world differently. It is important to make peace with each other, not keep a faux-sense of peace that might actually be disguised prejudice, narrow-mindedness, fear or racism disguised as peace. As Jesus disciples, we are called to disturb the peace in an effort to make room for real peace.

We sometimes see this within the walls of our churches. This can relate to declining attendance numbers because we do not share our truthful and sincere thoughts, concerns, opinions and doubts with each other for the sake of keeping this false sense of peace. Persons sensing, they have no voice to share their honest concerns or feelings in order to keep this false peace my leave—never to grace the door of any church again.

Peacekeepers suppress the opportunity we as Christians have within the church to challenge the status quo and pursue freedom as Christ intended it. Although it won't be easy, it is important that we take our lives back from being peacekeepers and instead become peacemakers.

The reason peacemakers are blessed is because they are joined to the Prince of Peace. Because of the inheritance of peace that was promised to believers by the Lord Himself. We have peace to impart from the peace we have received. The challenge is to be a peacemaker, and not just bask in the peace that we have received. What does a peacemaker look like? Have you ever known a person or persons who always seem to be surrounded by chaos and confusion?

God is not the author of confusion and He blesses peacemakers who by their presence and decree, can bring peace in the midst of chaos. It is like Jesus saying “peace be still” in the midst of a great storm. Peacemakers cause peace to be still in the storms of life through consistent behavior and trusted relationships. People watch those who have the testimony of Jesus to see if our faith is authentic, or if our lives are a contradiction of what we preach. The blessing that is upon the peacemakers, is that they walk in a manner that is consistently authentic. Peacemakers walk in Hebrews 12:14 — Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: it is the pursuit of peace that brings about consistency.

May you be called blessed today, because you are a peacemaker. My prayer for you today is that you will be undefiled, so that you can see the Prince of Peace clearly. You are a child of God, so let the peace of God be your portion and your lot today and every day! To God be the glory! Amen!