

## **“Christmas and Peace Go Together”**

### **Matthew 5:9**

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December 8, 2002

Today, we lit the candle of peace on the advent wreath. The songs we have sung and scriptures we have read have reminded us of the value and importance of peace. This will also be true of the final song we'll sing today, which is one of my favorites, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.”

However, when you leave this service, you will hear very little about peace beyond these walls. Wars and rumors of wars will saturate the airwaves. When you open the paper today, you will read much more about how to fight the War on Terror and the case for invading Iraq than you will about how to prevent more violence and bloodshed. I grieve over this and hope you do, too.

What would Jesus say to us today as we gather to worship under the banner of peace? What would his message be? The only way I know to answer this is to tell you what verse I was drawn to as I reflected upon this topic, Matthew 5:9. **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”**

You will recognize this as one of the Beatitudes. There are eight or nine of them, depending on how you count them. Jesus gave the Beatitudes to his disciples on a beautiful hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee. They are simple, profound, thought-provoking, stimulating and challenging. In light of current events, this one is especially challenging. Let's examine it today.

**Notice what Jesus did not say.** He did not say “Blessed are the peace lovers or peace keepers, but peace makers.” Who doesn't love peace? Who doesn't strive to keep it? With the exception of a few extremists, most of us do. However, there are not many that work to achieve it. That's a different ballgame. As hard as it is to keep peace, it is much harder and more stressful to achieve it.

Recall some of the peacemakers you have known, especially on the international scene. They paid a high price, didn't they? Some of them even paid the ultimate price and gave their lives. I still remember that October day in 1981 when President Anwar Sadat of Egypt was assassinated while reviewing troops at a parade in Cairo. He was killed by one of his own military personnel who was angry at Sadat for signing the Camp David Accords in 1978 with President Carter and Menachem Begin of Israel. Peacemaking is difficult, dangerous and risky.

**What is a peacemaker?** It is a person that uses every opportunity and even creates opportunities to bring about reconciliation among factions. A peacemaker does everything possible to turn enemies into friends. As another has written, “Peace is not the avoidance of conflict in proud isolation, but the desire to seek the highest good for others so they can enjoy life and all its blessings.” This is my understanding of the Hebrew greeting, Shalom, a wish for others to experience wholeness and well-being.

**Why do we need peacemakers?** This is pretty obvious. Our world is filled with strife, discord, misunderstandings, hatred, bitterness and conflict. This is true on a small scale in our homes or work places and on a larger scale in our nation and world. Look at

the price we pay for all this conflict, broken homes, stressed out people, strained relationships, overcrowded jails and full cemeteries. I believe this breaks God's heart. This is not the kind of world He created nor is He content to let it continue moving in this direction.

However, peace will not occur on its own. People don't drift into peace. They may get tired of fighting, but they don't reconcile without a lot of effort and hard work. Peace requires peacemakers.

**So, what must I do to become a peacemaker?** It begins internally. You cannot give what you do not have. **You must first have peace with God and recognize how that peace was achieved, through His initiative.**

Paul stated it beautifully in Romans 5:6-11, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we now have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Our peace with God was achieved at a high price, wasn't it? God sent His own son to be a peacemaker and it cost him his life, too. I am eternally grateful for his efforts and sacrifice, without which we would be forever estranged from God.

**Secondly, make peace with others a priority in your life.** Find a way to break down barriers and reconcile differences. Take the initiative just as God did with you.

I must be candid with you and remind you that this is not an option for a Christian. Listen again to Paul in II Corinthians 5: 16-18, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation."

Absolutely refuse to hold grudges or seek revenge. Make a commitment to God that there will be no barrier between you and another because you refuse to reach out to someone and work through your differences or forgive them for any harm they have done. If anything is clear from Jesus' words on the Sermon on the Mount, it is this. We are never to seek conflict or be responsible for it.

Recently, I spoke at the McAfee School of Theology Alumni and Friends Dinner. I made the point that theology not only needs to be learned but lived. "We need to show people what it means to love God, others, the world and ourselves," I said. "Let us never forget that the best lessons are modeled. Sermons need to be seen as well as heard. Incarnational preaching is not an option. I would be willing to say that the most powerful sermon ever preached consisted of only ten words, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' "

Peace occurs only when it is a person's priority. The temptation to withhold forgiveness and seek revenge will overcome a tepid desire to reconcile.

Is reconciliation a priority with you? Can you name one person who was an enemy that is now your friend?

**Thirdly, support and encourage those who promote “peace on earth goodwill toward men.”** They need your help. They face immeasurable risks, dangers and obstacles. They need to know they are not alone and their voice is being heard and their message is appreciated.

One of the voices speaking out for peace is Tony Campolo's. He is the Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Eastern University in St. David's, Pennsylvania and the Associate Pastor of the Mount Carmel Baptist Church in West Philadelphia. Two weeks ago he made a statement in a worship service that captured my attention and imagination. “What if,” he said, “we made Iraq and other enemies of America as dependent upon us for medical care and food as we are dependent upon them for oil? How would that alter the course of events?” This question has made me restless ever since I heard it.

Voices from the past have spoken out for peace, too. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under President Eisenhower, said, “The world will never have lasting peace so long as men reserve for war the finest human qualities. Peace, no less than war, requires idealism and self-sacrifice and a righteous and dynamic faith.”

Harry Emerson Fosdick, former pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City prayed, “Eternal God, Father of all souls, grant us such clear vision of the sin of war that we may earnestly seek that cooperation between nations which alone can make peace possible.”

Moshe Dayan, the former Israeli Foreign Minister, wrote, “If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies.”

What is the world hearing from you about the way to win the War on Terror and achieve justice? Do you advocate destroying our enemies or turning them into friends? What are your words teaching your children and grandchildren about how to settle their differences on the playground and in the home?

In this sermon, I have not even alluded to the last part of this beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers **for they will be called the children of God.**” The result of being a peacemaker is no small honor. As a matter of fact, what greater honor could come your way? Remember the words that were spoken at Jesus' baptism, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” How do you think that made Jesus feel? Become a peacemaker and you will know!