



“Rerouting: Peacemakers”

Matthew 5:9; Matthew 5:21-26; Matthew 18:21-35; 1 Peter 3:8-12

We are to be peacemakers, practicing forgiveness and mercy even when it is hard.

Last week, we saw that the Beatitudes are terse proclamations of good news for those who enter God’s kingdom, those who grieve, seek peace, are humble, and more. As Jesus moves forward in the sermon, he begins to put more flesh on the bare bones of the Beatitudes,

enabling us to see more clearly the life for which we have been saved.

Yes, the arrival of God’s kingdom is wonderful news for the peacemakers and in Matthew 5:21-26, Jesus lays out more of what this peace really means in practice. If we are to live in God’s kingdom now, how do we approach all the others in this world. Well, first, we don’t murder them. Simple enough. But how about anger and hostility and conflict that mark our days and our relationships? There is no room for such in the kingdom. As Peter writes, quoting Psalm 34, we are to “seek peace and pursue it.”

Lest we think this is a simple task of being “nice,” Jesus offers up a couple of examples that aptly illustrate just how far we must be prepared in seeking peace. N. T. Wright is helpful here (as he is almost everywhere!):

Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. Be reconciled; make friends. How simple that is—and yet how hugely difficult and costly! It will almost certainly involve climbing down from the high pedestal on which you have placed yourself, abandoning your position of superiority over the person you’re angry with. But genuine humans don’t live on pedestals; they have their feet on the ground, on a level with everybody else.

In particular—and this is very striking—reconciliation takes precedence even over worship. Jesus imagines someone getting all the way into the Temple courtyard, buying a sacrificial animal on the way, and suddenly remembering (as well one might, when approaching the presence of the loving and holy God) some relationship that has gone wrong. The scene then becomes almost comic. It takes about three days to get back to Galilee, where most of Jesus’ hearers lived. He cannot seriously have imagined an anxious worshipper leaving a live animal sitting there in the Temple courts for a week while they scurried back home, apologized to the offended person, and then returned to Jerusalem. As so often in his teaching, he seems to be exaggerating to make the point. The point is that you must live, day by day, in such a way that when you come to worship there is no anger between you and your neighbor, your sister, your brother. Impossible? Jesus implies that it isn’t, now that he is here to show the way.

Then the picture widens. You and a neighbor are actually going before a judge to fight out your legal differences. Don’t even get to court, he says. Sort it out beforehand, or you may end up in jail and paying every penny you have. This may well be good advice as it stands, but it most likely reaches far beyond mere lawsuits. Israel in Jesus’ day was in trouble, oppressed by pagans from outside and by rich aristocrats from inside. Many Jews longed for their day in God’s court when they would be proved right and their enemies overthrown. Don’t even think of it like that, says Jesus. Make friends, not enemies. He will return to this point later in the chapter (verses 38–48). Otherwise, what will happen? Your enemies may win after all, and then what will you do?¹

¹ N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-15* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 44–45.

Forgiveness

We could talk a lot about having peace within ourselves, but the focus of Jesus' words are on making peace with others and so much of that work lies in seeking and offering genuine forgiveness for hurts committed against one another.

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. Sadly, this is a truth that one servant never learned.

The unforgiving servant

This parable comes from Matthew 18, part of the fourth long block of Jesus' teaching in the gospel. Beginning in verse 15, Jesus tells his disciples how to handle situations where one has been sinned against by another. The offender is to be taken before two or three witnesses and, if needed, the larger community of believers. If the offender refuses "to listen even to the church," Jesus says, they are to be treated like a "Gentile or tax collector." Neither is good, so far as Jesus' disciples are concerned.

Then, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who has sinned against him. Perhaps seven times, Peter suggests. But instead of affirming Peter's notions of forgiveness, Jesus tells him that he is to forgive "seventy times seven." In other words, Peter is to forgive without limit. He is to forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive . . . Jesus then tells Peter a parable to help him grasp the full truth about forgiveness.

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave owes the king 10,000 talents! To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be

Our Peace

Peace so often eludes us. We find ourselves to be anxious and uncertain, unsure of where to turn next or how to go about finding the life we seek. The ancient Jews understood that the peace we seek can be found only in our relationship with God. They had a word for this: shalom. It cannot be translated with a single word. Shalom is prosperity, health, peace, wellness, completeness, safety, harmony, satisfaction, fulfillment, unity, victory, restoration.

Though we usually think of peace in the sense of our own inner peace, shalom for the ancient Jews was often a relational word, nearly synonymous with justice. It was about two persons living in an equitable, often covenantal, relationship. Thus, in the Old Testament, shalom can come when a payment is made or an obligation is met, for equity is restored between the two parties. Payment of the tithe, what was to be returned to God, was crucial to maintaining the Israelites' covenantal relationship with YHWH.

Simply put, shalom is the restoration of wholeness. It is well-being and is bound up with our relationship with God. Only when we love God and love neighbor, which is the heart of that relationship and which is grounded in action, can we find the peace we seek and that God desires for us.

But we cannot expect to find this peace so long as we hold back any portion of ourselves or our life, as if what matters is only our time or our talents and not our money. And it won't come if we give from the leftovers, rather than from the first fruits of our work. The wholeness that is shalom is just that, encompassing all that we are and have, holding nothing back.

patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity was highly valued in the ancient near-eastern cultures. If someone does something for me, I then am obligated to do something similar for them. The forgiven servant naturally then assumes that the reciprocity he owes his master is to be extended only to his master.

But the parable makes clear that the generosity the slave received should have been passed on to others. As John Carroll writes, "The kindness from which I have benefitted should reach to touch others who had no part in that original act of kindness. Since, in the parable, the king in some way embodies the graciousness of God, the point is that I should be so transformed by the experience of divine grace that I am able to bring that same grace and mercy into all my relationships with others."²

As with all the parables, we have to be careful about pushing them too far, e.g., seeing the character of the king as telling us more about God than the parable intends. This is a parable about forgiveness told in response to a question about forgiveness not about the nature of God.

Pursuing peace

The peace we seek won't come by accident; we won't stumble onto it or discover it thrust upon us. Rather, Peter reminds us that the pursuit of peace takes seriousness and discipline. Indeed, Peter calls the Christians to disciplined lives three times in this short letter (1:13; 4:7; 5:8). This isn't about leading stern, joyless lives. But it is about seriousness of purpose and the application of our time, talents, gifts, and services to the work of God's kingdom.

² from *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by James and John Carroll, Hendrickson Publishing, 1996