

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Much And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Blessed Are The Peacemakers

November 14th, 2021

Matthew 5:9

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I'd invite you to open it now to Matthew chapter 5. We're taking a long, slow walk through the Sermon On The Mount and we are zooming in today on the 7th beatitude:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9 ESV)

Can you think of anything this world needs more right now than peacemakers?

In my 47 years of life I have never seen the world – or the church – as divided and WRACKED by bitter conflict as it is right now.

Of course the pandemic hasn't helped.

On March 12 of 2020, just as the pandemic due to COVID19 was breaking across North America, New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote these eerily prophetic words.

“Some disasters, like hurricanes and earthquakes, can bring people together, but if history is any judge, **pandemics generally drive them apart.**”¹

Talk about using history to predict the future! He even gave his article the subtitle:

“You may not like who you’re about to become.”

Wow. Let me ask you church: do you like who we’ve become?

Under the pressure of this pandemic all of the fractures in our society have widened into seemingly unbridgeable divides. What kind of world are we going to have when this is finally over? What kind of culture are we going to pass on to our children? What hope is there? What sort of person is needed – what sort of church is needed to heal the breach and to turn back the tide?

Oh! Blessed are the peacemakers! For they shall be called sons of God!!!

So let’s talk about that this morning. By God’s grace we’re going to ask and hopefully answer 3 questions together:

1. What does it mean to “make peace”?
2. What does it mean to be called “sons of God”?
3. How do we make peace in a fractured and hostile world?

Let’s begin at the beginning:

What Does It Mean To “Make Peace”?

What sort of peace is Jesus talking about here? Well, based on the authoritative interpretation of the Apostles it would appear that Jesus had TWO types of peace in mind. First of all, and most importantly, he was thinking about peace with God. That was the essence of the commission and mandate that Christ received from the Father. The Apostle Paul said in Colossians 1:19-20:

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/opinion/pandemic-coronavirus-compassion.html>

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19–20 ESV)

Jesus was sent into the world, by the Father, to reconcile all things to God!

It is sin that is driving this world FURTHER and FURTHER away from God – can you feel that brothers and sisters? Doesn't it feel as though the world is still falling – driven by sin – further and further away from God?

When will it stop?

How will it stop?

According to the Bible it will ONLY stop when the sins of men and women, boys and girls, are absorbed and extinguished by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. As long as we are WEARING our sins – like a blood soaked garment – we will always be running away from God. God has a settled antagonism toward sin – it is like reverse magnetism! So if you are “in your sins” then you may as well have swallowed a bag of iron filings because you are going to be REPELLED by the holiness of God – and the holiness of God is going to be repelled by you.

A world FILLED with sin is a world FLYING AWAY from God – and the only solution for that is the cross of Jesus Christ.

What can wash away my sins?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

What can make me whole again?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

The blood of Jesus is powerful! It can save your soul and it can save the world. Thanks be to God – Jesus came to reconcile the whole world – all things, whether on earth or in heaven – making PEACE by the blood of the cross.

But according to the Apostles, he also came to reconcile to people to each other. So in Ephesians 2:14 Paul says:

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14 ESV)

So Jesus came to reconcile us to God and also to reconcile us to each other. He came to REUNITE what sin had driven apart. He came to make us faith, one flesh, one family – thanks be to God. So when we think about peacemaking we have to think in terms of a vertical dynamic and a horizontal dynamic. D.A. Carson says here:

“The Christian’s role as peacemaker extends not only to spreading the gospel, but to lessening tensions, seeking solutions, ensuring that communication is understood.”²

Alright – so that’s what we’re talking about, that’s what it means make peace. But what does it mean to be called “sons of God”? That’s our second question.

What Does It Mean To Be Called “Sons Of God”?

Some translations will have this as “children of God” – trying to make it sound more gender neutral, and that isn’t always a bad thing – but here in this case I think it kind of obscures what Jesus is trying to get at. It appears as though Jesus is making use of a common cultural idiom. Within Judaism in those days it was common to refer to people who acted a certain way in terms of their assumed authority and source. So 27 times in the Old Testament for example, it uses the expression “Sons of Belial” which means roughly “sons of the devil” or “sons of worthlessness”. But they don’t translate that into English because we don’t talk like that. So for example in Judges 19:22 in the ESV it says:

² D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 26.

“As they were making their hearts merry, behold, the men of the city, **worthless fellows**, surrounded the house, beating on the door.” (Judges 19:22 ESV)

The Hebrew there, translated “worthless fellows” is literally “sons of Belial”. So everybody knew that expression – like I said, it is used 27 times in the Hebrew Bible! So here, Jesus is flipping that on its head – he is saying, “Do you want to be known as a son of the devil? Or do you want to be known as a son of God? If so, then be a peacemaker. Be like your dad. Then people will say, he’s just a chip off the old block.”

That’s what Jesus is saying here. If you want to be like God – if you want to be KNOWN and IDENTIFIED as a true follower of God – then be a peacemaker.

I mentioned earlier in the series that all of these beatitudes function as a test of faith – none more so than this one. Here Jesus is saying: test yourself to see if you are a son of the devil or a son of God. Sons of God are making peace. Everywhere they go, people get closer to God and closer to one another. Sons of the devil stir up enmity and strife – which one are you?

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9 ESV)

That leads us to our third question:

How Do We Make Peace In A Fractured And Hostile World?

I want to park here for a bit because, as I mentioned a few moments ago, this really is the most urgent need of the hour, so we need more than definitions this morning, we need applications! So I’ve thought of 5 – but if you have more or better, by all means pass them on! We need all the help we can get here. Here are the 5 that came most immediately to my heart and mind as I read and prayed my way through this text. First of all, if we’re going to make peace in a fractured and hostile world we need to find our identity in Christ.

1. Find your identity in Christ

If your identity is PRIMARILY a matter of any other association THAN your association with Jesus Christ – then you are part of the problem! If you are MORE committed to your NATION, your RACE, your POLITICS or your OPINIONS than you are to Jesus Christ – you are part of the reason that there is so little peace right now on planet earth - and not to put too fine a point on it, but you are part of the reason why there is so little peace right now within the church.

I participated in a video conference event this past week hosted by our new association – the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists – and the speaker at the event was a fellow named Ed Stetzer. The topic was “Post COVID Ecclesiology” – ecclesiology just means what we believe about the church. He said that COVID has accelerated a number of trends that people like him were already studying before the pandemic – one of them was the existence of something he called “The Big Sort”. What he said was that the evangelical church in North America was dividing because people were beginning to identify PRIMARILY on the basis of POLITICS and IDEOLOGY rather than religious conviction. So he said that people used to want their church to align with them THEOLOGICALLY – but now they want to go to a church that agrees with them POLITICALLY – they want to go to a church that believes the same thing they do about immigration, about race, about Donald Trump, about COVID, about MASKS and about VACCINES.

So what happens? That church of 300 from 5 years ago becomes 4 churches of 75 – or more likely 4 churches of 50 because that’s the most people you can get to agree with you on all that stuff – and you probably disillusion a bunch of people into dropping out entirely over the course of the process.

Are you seeing that brothers and sisters?

If our identity IS PRIMARILY in anything other than Christ – if we identify with our nation, our political party, our race, our perspective on government, our perspective on science, our perspective on COVID – if we find our identity in any of those things – as opposed to finding it in Christ then we will NEVER be PEACEMAKERS out in the world – for crying out loud – we’ll never be able to live at peace within the church!

The Gospel DEPRIORITIZES all other forms of identity and association. It always has. The Apostle Paul said to the Galatians:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27–28 ESV)

According to Paul – if you are a BAPTIZED believer in Christ – then CHRIST is your primary identity now. So – to the folks who just got baptized today, let's put some feet on this. If someone asks you later today WHO YOU ARE – your first answer ought to be: “I am a baptized follower of Jesus Christ! I am a child of the King! I am a Christian!”

That's who you are now! Before you are anything else – YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST!

If you don't understand that, you will never bring peace to the world and you will never be at peace within the church. You will always belong to some SPLINTER GROUP and the devil will be constantly supplying you with a long list of ENEMIES, OPPONENTS and OUTSIDERS

So STEP ONE is you have to find your identity in Christ.

Step two is obviously related to that: you have to keep the focus of your ministry on proclaiming Christ.

2. Keep the focus of your ministry on proclaiming Christ

Christians are always trying to take short cuts that end up ultimately in waste and ruin. We try to make change through politics or social action or by building this institution or by providing this or that resource – but all of that, if it is not rooted in and subservient to the need to be proclaiming Christ will prove ultimately FUTILE! Because none of that addresses the root issue. Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones says here:

“The trouble, according to Scripture, is in the heart of man, and until the heart of man is changed, you will never solve his problem by trying to make manipulations on the surface. If the source of

the trouble is in the fountain and the origin from which the stream comes, is it not obviously a waste of time and money and energy to be pouring chemicals into the stream in an attempt to cure the condition? You must go to the source.”³

You must go to the source!!! If the well is contaminated then you can do whatever you like to the pipes further down the system, but that isn't going to fix the problem! So we have to keep preaching the Gospel our first priority.

Over the long haul – this is the surest path to peace. If people are filled with greed, suspicion, lust and hostility – then no amount of legislation, infrastructure or education is going to solve the problem. You've got to go after the heart of men and women – you have to go after people. If people don't change, then systems don't matter. So if we want to be peacemakers, we have to keep the focus on proclaiming Christ.

And then thirdly, and getting right down to brass tacks here, we need to keep a tight reign on our tongues.

3. Keep a tight reign on your tongue

According to the Bible, the tongue is the main way that conflicts grow and spread. The Apostle James said:

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.
How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! (James 3:5 ESV)

You will never be a peacemaker if you love to gossip, if you are inclined to slander and if you feel compelled to share your opinions on secondary things. Lloyd Jones again is helpful here, he says:

“One of the first things in making peace is to know when not to speak.”⁴

³ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 102.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 107.

Social Media of course has enormously complicated this challenge. Social Media encourages us to share our opinions on everything. Social Media makes it easy for us to pass on gossip, hearsay and slander. It almost makes you wonder who designed these things – doesn't it? If I were the devil and you offered me all the tea in China, I don't think I could have designed a better way of spreading hate, conspiracy and slander than through Facebook.

It takes the small fire of the tongue and makes it an absolute inferno.

Listen, brothers and sisters, let me get REALLY practical here with you. Some of you need to dramatically rethink your social media strategy because you need to understand that you are part of the problem.

I have MARVELLED and stood GOBSMACKED by some of the things Christians have been posting on Facebook over the last 2 years. We will forward any piece of conspiratorial nonsense about things we know absolutely nothing. People who never took a science class in their LIVES are giving everyone and their brother medical advice over the internet. Canadians who can't even VOTE in American elections are broadcasting their political preferences FAR AND WIDE.

To what end, believer?

To what end?

The only END I can see is an END to our witness in this culture.

STOP.

Refocus.

Remember what it's all about. Jesus didn't send us out into the world to win elections, he didn't send us out into the world to advocate for medical treatments, he didn't send us out in the world to bring down governments – he sent us out into the world to make disciples. That needs to be your social media strategy. Before you post anything you need to ask the question: will this post

help people love and follow Jesus? With the rest of us who are trying to love and follow Jesus?
YES OR NO.

If you aren't asking that – then you are in the way.

I'm not sure how else to put it.

“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” (Proverbs 12:18 ESV)

The church father Augustine used to boast about his dear mother Monica. Whenever she saw two people on the outs, she would always speak the best about each person to the other, whatever good she heard about the one, she would quickly carry to the other, but if she heard anything bad, she would hide it or soften it as best she could and by doing this she was often able to effect a reconciliation⁵.

We need more Monicas in the church of Jesus Christ today. We need more people who know how to use and restrain their tongues in the cause of peace.

So, find your identity in Christ, keep your focus on proclaiming Christ, keep a tight reign on your tongue and then fourthly here:

4. Overwhelm enemies with kindness and good deeds

That's the practical advice given by the Apostle Paul. He says in Romans 12, don't play tit for tat, don't hit back, don't plan revenge when people wrong you:

To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Romans 12:20 ESV)

Augustine explains the citation from Proverbs 25:22 this way, he says:

⁵ As narrated by Luther, 43. I read it too somewhere. I think in the Confessions. No need for a slide for this quote. More anecdotal than direct citation.

“We should incite those who have hurt us to repentance by doing them good. For such ‘coals of fire’, that is, good deeds, have the power to consume his spirit, or to grieve him.”⁶

That seems to be the same approach favoured by the Apostle Peter. He said to his people:

“Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴ But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.” (1 Peter 3:13–16 ESV)

So the Apostles seem to hold to the opinion that many of these fires could be put out with a cup of cold water, as it were, given in Jesus’ name.

Good deeds quiet our opponents, expand our permission, and give weight to our Words about Jesus. So this isn’t a contradiction to what we were saying in point 2 about keeping our focus in ministry on proclamation – we’re not UNSAYING that here – we’re saying that GOOD DEEDS can serve and extend our ministry of proclamation. They can water the soil as it were and remove barriers and undermine resistance to the Gospel. So if you want to be a peacemaker, learn to make wise and strategic use of good deeds.

And then lastly: keep yourself firmly rooted in the future.

5. Be primarily rooted in the future

I’ve been studying my way through the Book of Ezra for a new Into The Word series releasing in January. There is an interesting story there in chapter 3. The Book of Ezra of course is about the return from Exile. The Jews spent 70 years in exile in Babylon. They were on full lockdown, as it were. They were cut off from worship, cut off from all their feasts and festivals - God put them on time out and he ground them down to a relatively small remnant because of their sin and

⁶ Augustine as cited by Luther in his commentary on Romans, 178. If turning into a slide, just cite it as “Augustine”.

unfaithfulness. But then, in his mercy, he turned the heart of the king and a decree was issued letting them go and authorizing the rebuilding of the temple. So a group of them set out from Babylon to undertake the project. In Ezra 3 we are told that they rebuilt the altar and they cleared the foundation and they rededicated the temple area and they had a little ceremony – but not everyone was able to get excited about that. Ezra 3:11 and following says:

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, ¹³ so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3:11–13 ESV)

Are you seeing that? The older folks – those who remembered the glory of the former days – they couldn't get on board, they couldn't rejoice in the day of small beginnings. Because what they were seeing with their eyes didn't line up very well with what they remembered from their past.

Nostalgia.

It can be a real joy killer – and it can be a real unity destroyer. How much of the conflict in North America right now is being driven by an extreme form of nostalgia? “We want to go back to the golden age of the 1950's! When men were men and women were women, when people wore suits to church and Christians were respected in the Public Square!”

The lure of the GOLDEN AGE is a powerful thing. But of course as a Christian, you know that there will be NO TRUE GOLDEN AGE until Jesus Christ returns to rule and reign over all things – will you say amen to that? So it's not about going BACK for us – it's about going forward. Peace is in the future – not in the past. If we want to make PEACE we are going to have to be like Abraham who LEFT his father's house behind to go to a land that God would show him. That's faith – that's FUTURE faith and that's the faith you have to have if you want to be a peacemaker.

An over strong connection to the past will undermine your effectiveness as a peacemaker – but so can an over strong connection to the present - or at least of the riches and the privileges that you enjoy in the present. Greed and selfishness are major sources of conflict according to the Apostle James. He said:

What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?² You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. (James 4:1–2 ESV)

If the stuff that you HAVE – or that your neighbour has – means too much to you, then you will never be a peacemaker, you'll be a conflict maker. That's why Jesus said:

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33 ESV)

Added to you when? Added to you in the future.

If you want to be a peacemaker now, then you have to be firmly rooted and primarily invested in the future.

It's a high calling, I grant you, but the need for this in our fractured and failing world – and the benefits of this for – promised to you by Jesus Christ himself – are impossible to overestimate.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9 ESV)

Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.