

Pursuing Peace in a Sin-Filled World

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” So commands the Lord via the Apostle Paul (Rom. 12:18). But in a sin-filled world, that’s quite a tall order!

Think of your own experiences in life. How often have you been offended by the words or actions of others? How often have you offended others by your own harsh words or deeds? How often have you caused offense without intending to do so – perhaps without even *realizing* it?

Sometimes we cause offense by expressing our sinful attitudes or desires; while other times the offense arises from misunderstanding or miscommunication.

“Live at peace with everyone” is a hard command to obey in such a world. In fact, on our own strength and abilities, it’s more than *hard*. It’s *impossible*.

True *peace* demands confrontation and rebuke, confession and repentance. It involves the discomfort of raising matters that might cause anger or embarrassment. It requires recognizing that something is wrong – that sin has made inroads that have divided brothers or neighbors – and then embracing the hard work of *erasing* those inroads.

Then there are the opposing forces. Our old nature continually whispers: “Just let sleeping dogs lie. Better a little tension unexpressed than a full-blown explosion. Just sit down and *ignore it!* Surely it will go away.” And to complicate matters, sometimes the offense involves unbelievers – folks who don’t play by the rules God has commanded. With unbelievers, peace often seems utterly unattainable. Shouldn’t we just ignore it and hope it goes away?

But that’s the problem: it *won’t* go away – not on its own. God hasn’t designed us to simply *forget* unresolved offense. He has created us to *address* the offense, to *respond*, and to pursue *reconciliation*. Even if the reconciliation never occurs: we’re called to *pursue* it to our *utmost*.

And that means different things at different times.

Laying a Foundation for Peace: Adopting a Loving Attitude

Sometimes, the pursuit of peace with others simply means resolving to bear no ill will concerning minor offenses.

The Lord calls us to regard and treat one another in the light of our unity in Christ. “Above all, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble” (1 Pet. 3:8). He commands us to reflect the character of God to one another. “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2).

First Line of Defense: Avoid Offense

Living out these commands means, first of all, *avoiding* that which might cause or spread offense.

Peter illustrates this by calling us to not repay insult with insult; but to answer instead with blessing. He says we need to guard our tongues, being careful not to harm or deceive with our words. Our words ought to pursue *peace* (1 Pet. 3:9-11).

In Romans 12, Paul expresses a similar message of avoiding offense by calling on us to show devotion and honor to one another (Rom. 12:10). We need to share what God has given us: giving of our possessions to those who are in need; sharing our hearts with those who mourn; sharing our time and love with those of low position (Rom. 12:13-16).

Similarly, in Ephesians 4, Paul urges us to avoid falsehood, slander, unwholesome talk, and the attitudes of bitterness, rage, prolonged anger, and malice (Eph. 4:25-31).

Whatever might cause offense; whatever might allow offense to grow or spread – these we must reject, for the sake of Christ.

Second Step to Peace: Cover It with Love

In addition, we must be willing to “cover over” offenses against us which are relatively minor.

That sounds like a contradiction to what I wrote above, but consider the fact that each of us sins *countless times* each day. Often we don’t even recognize that we have sinned. Yet God forgives us for these unintentional offenses.

In a similar way, those around us cause a host of offenses *unintentionally*: a husband leaves his dirty clothes on the floor rather than in the hamper; a child carelessly leaves a toy in the doorway; a friend doesn’t think to offer a cookie while getting one for himself.

Such sins are not intentional, but they can cause offense. So the Lord tells us: "Love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." He wants our love to be the sort that is not easily angered and keeps no record of such wrongs (1 Cor. 13:5), seeing to it that no bitterness grows up to trouble the Church (Heb. 12:15).

But sometimes the offense is greater. Sometimes it is more than can be simply "covered over."

That's when things get tough. What do we do when we are cut to the heart by those around us? How should we respond when those who hurt us are Christians, and they don't even seem to care?

If the Lord is willing, we'll talk more about such situations next week.