

Pursuing Peace When It's Not Easy (Part 2 of 2)

“Live at peace with everyone,” Paul tells us in Rom. 12:18.

Now, only a young child would think this command can be fully obeyed in our fallen world. There's too much sin and hard-heartedness. And the apostle recognized that reality. Therefore he added two phrases to the command:

First, “if it is possible.” Speaking for the Lord Himself, Paul recognized that there will be times when we simply will not be able to be at peace with others.

But then he adds a second qualifier: “as far as it depends on you.” Although we might not live at peace with everyone, we must ensure that the unrest is not *our* fault. It must not arise from our refusal to forgive, because we have been forgiven of so much (Matt. 6:14-15). It must not be due to our hardness of heart, because we've been given a new heart (Ezek.36:26-27). It must not be the result of our continued sin, since we've been freed from sin (Rom. 6:11).

Therefore the Lord commands us: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Last week, we saw that this command requires us first to avoid *causing* or *spreading* offense toward others. We must seek peace *proactively*, by being peaceful people. And second, we saw that this command is a call to “cover over” small offenses. Those sins and offenses which are unintentional or minor should be “covered over” with love, which means immediately forgiving and resolving to keep no record of such wrongs.

But sometimes the offense is greater. Sometimes it is more than can be simply “covered over.” This is the case with sins that cut to the heart, whether because they were committed intentionally or because they caused deep hurt. What *then* must be our response?

Rebuke, Repentance, Forgiveness

Jesus tells us in Luke 17:3-4. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

Rebuke him? Yes – gently and with love, we must confront the one who has sinned and ask him to repent. We should tell him why his action was wrong – how it violated God's commands – then ask him to confess his sin and agree not to commit it again. We do this in private (Matt. 18:15), to limit knowledge of the sin. And it should be our desire to see him recognize and turn away from his sin, so that our relationship will be restored – and so that he (or she) will not continue going about causing offense against man and God (James 5:19-20).

This is precisely what *Jesus* does with regard to *our* sins, isn't it? He confronts us with His commands, and He calls us to repent. *If* we repent, He forgives us. But He *does not* offer forgiveness if we *refuse* to repent – because that should show that our love for sin is greater than our love for Him.

Handling the Hard-Hearted

Not everyone will repent. Sometimes, folks refuse to repent because they don't believe that what they did was wrong. Other times, they dispute the facts, claiming (and maybe believing) that things happened differently than you say. And sometimes, they refuse because they are hard-hearted, preferring sin over your relationship – and over their relationship to the Lord.

Of course, if they claim things happened differently, we need to be open to that possibility. None of us is perfect, and we might have gotten it wrong.

But if they refuse to repent and we're sure of what happened, what then?

What we must *not* do is bear a grudge against them (Eph. 4:31). Instead, we must follow the Lord, who seeks His errant sheep until He can restore them (Luke 15:3-7). We need to seek their repentance passionately, recognizing that souls are at stake (James 5:19-20).

And if they steadfastly refuse to hear us, yet profess to be Christians, we must approach them with witnesses. If necessary, we must be willing to take the matter to the elders (Matt. 18:15-18). True Christians eventually *will* repent and be reconciled. If they refuse when even the elders call them to repent, a faithful Church will cause them to recognize that their refusal to be reconciled with men demonstrates that they also are not reconciled with the Lord.

If they are not Christians, the best we can do may simply be to love them anyway, striving to rebuild the relationship despite the continued sin. After all, we can't expect unbelievers to forgive as Christians do. And who knows but that our longsuffering love might be the witness that draws them to the Lord?

On the other hand, if they repent and we forgive, we may not regard that forgiveness as a one-time offer. It's likely that they will sin against us again, perhaps even in the same way. In such a case, Jesus calls us to forgive *multiple* times, even within one day.

Hearing that, His disciples begged, “Increase our faith!” That was the right request! Only strength granted by the Lord can enable this kind of forgiveness. And our willingness to forgive is not merely an option. Jesus said, “If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:15).

“I Did *What?*”

One last wrinkle remains: what if *you* are the one who *caused* the offense?

If you realize you caused offense when a brother approaches you to point out your sin, you need to apologize, seek forgiveness, and promise before the Lord not to repeat the sin. If the offense was merely a misunderstanding, clarify your original intention and apologize for inadvertently causing offense. In either case, resolve not to cause the offense again, and do all that you can to seek reconciliation, in obedience to God’s command in Rom. 12:18.

But sometimes you recognize the offense *before* the other person comes to you. Or you know that *something* is wrong – but you don’t know what or why.

Jesus says: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

In other words, *drop everything*; figure out what’s wrong; and do your best to *fix it*. So important is this command that Jesus says we should delay our worship, if necessary, to pursue peace with our brother or sister in Christ.

Does that mean we *should* delay worship (for example, by abstaining from the Lord’s Supper) because of unresolved conflicts? Perhaps – but that’s not the focus. The focus is: let *nothing* stop you from seeking peace!

Our Ultimate Goal: Unity in Christ

What we must *not* be content to do is *falsely pretend* we have reconciled.

We all know how that goes: You apologize, or perhaps you confront me with the tension you’ve felt between us; and I respond by saying that I have no ill will toward you. You ask if there’s anything we need to discuss, and I shrug, saying that I really don’t feel the need. “I’m at peace with everything,” I explain. But my actions don’t show peace. Instead, they show *division* and *disunity*. I no longer want anything to do with you. I won’t return your telephone calls, don’t invite you over for coffee, and go out of my way to avoid you at social functions.

That’s not reconciliation. That’s living a lie.

The Lord tells us through Paul that we must “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Eph. 4:1). He then explains that this involves humility, gentleness, patience, and “bearing with one another in love.”

None of that is easy. In fact, it’s downright hard. Sometimes, we feel like just cutting our losses in a difficult relationship – by cutting off the person with whom we’ve encountered difficulties.

But that’s not what it means to “keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Instead, it’s a breaking of that one Body into which we were brought through our one Lord, one faith and one baptism, by our one God and Father (Eph. 4:4-6).

So let us strive together to preserve the unity that is ours – and which is our calling – in Christ. When sin or thoughtlessness breaks that unity, let us strive to recover it. And *especially* when the disunity occurs between Christians, let us not be content to stop short of complete reconciliation in Christ.

“In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:5). Therefore, “Live in harmony with one another. ... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:16,18). And may the Lord reveal in us the unity He has obtained in Christ!