



Blessed are the Peacemakers

St. Matthew 5:9

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July 6, 2008 – Trinity 7

In Matthew 5:9, Jesus tells us:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

And in looking at the beatitudes, I think this more than any other has been misunderstood, misused, and misapplied by people both inside and outside of the Church. But even more, the way in which it has been misunderstood and misapplied really embodies the problems that men and women have with the Beatitudes as a whole.

When I was a seminary student I was required to take a New Testament exegesis course – basically an in-depth, semester long, Bible study with an extra heavy focus on using the Greek text. One of the textbooks we used in that class was a summary of various modern approaches to the Sermon on the Mount. It described the “new,” “novel,” and “innovative” ideas that various – mostly liberal Christian – theologians took in interpreting what Jesus has to say in these three chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel. The most disturbing thing about the book was the fact that there was a chapter devoted to how one particular Hindu guru interpreted Jesus' Sermon – and not so much disturbing that a Hindu was included, but that the Hindu came closer to getting at the real meaning of what Jesus has to say than most of the so-called Christians did. The ultimate problem with most of these guys was that they either turned the Sermon on the Mount into a series of mechanistic promises – “Do ‘this’ and you *will* be blessed.” – or they applied these principles to the World instead of the Church, calling on unredeemed men and women with unregenerate hearts to live out the Sermon on the Mount in order to make a better world. They took the great sermon preached by the Son of God who came to redeem us from our fallen state and to restore us to fellowship with God, and they effectively removed God himself from its message. These men were the

great scholars of the last century and yet they took one of the most important texts in Holy Scripture and gave the shallowest of interpretations.

And so is it any wonder that if the Church gets it wrong here, so does the World? I don't think there's anyone in the world who doesn't want to be blessed. The problem is that the natural man wants that blessing on his own terms and not God's. In my mind the most prominent example of this man-centred and humanistic desire for the good things of God on our own terms is the United Nations. And that ties into our lesson today on Jesus' own statement that the peacemakers will be called sons of God. The U.N. was founded after the Second World War as a way to bring peace among the nations. On the wall across the street, in United Nations Plaza, are carved the words of Isaiah 2:4, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” The whole point is to bring that hoped for peace. They want the promises of Isaiah's prophecy, they want that more than anything else, and yet they don't want the God who made that promise, and they don't want peace on his terms.

People put bumper stickers on their cars that say things like, “Visualise World Peace” or some variation of the old 1960's “Peace” logo or “Peace is a Family Value.” I can “visualise world peace” and I do think that “peace is a family value,” but I can't help but think that the people driving around with those bumper stickers are, just like those who carved Isaiah's prophecy of peace at the U.N., visualising a peace without the redeeming and renewing work of God taking place in the hearts of sinful men.

The World thinks of peace as the absence of war, violence, and hostilities. But if that's how we define peace, we've degraded it. To really understand what peace is, we have to look at Jesus, whom Scripture describes as the Prince of Peace. The whole point of Jesus' ministry on earth was to bring peace between God and man. None of the conflicts that have ever taken place on earth can compare with the conflict that has existed between God and man since the Fall. Imagine the atrocities that were committed by men like Nero and Hitler against their fellow men and women – terrible things that we can hardly

imagine – and yet every time we sin we do even worse *to God* as we violate and offend his *perfect* holiness, his *perfect* righteousness, and his *perfect* justice. Every act of sin on our part is an act of treason against the God who loved us enough to create us, despite the fact that he had no need for us and despite the fact that he knew before he formed us that we would rebel against him. Every act of sin on our part is a wilful defacing of the image of God that each of us bears. Every act of sin on our part – every violation of God's Law – cries out for God's perfect justice and our own death!

You see, we don't like to hear that. We don't usually think of our sin in those terms. We think of other people's sins in those terms – the sins of people in prison, or on death row, or the sins of mass murders and genocidal dictators – but not our own. We think of *our* sins as little peccadilloes. “Peccadillo” – it even sounds cute and harmless. “Sure,” we say, “we probably shouldn't have done such and such, but who's it gonna hurt? It was just a little bit of fun.” It hurts and offends God! When the words of peace from Isaiah were carved on the wall at United Nations Plaza, they missed what Isaiah described will come first: in order to bring that final peace, God has to deal with sin. “For behold, the LORD will come in fire, and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, upon all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many” (Isaiah 66:15-16). St. John reminds us that at the last judgement “if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).

Those are some serious words that describe just how separated from God we are as sinners – how we stand condemned before our righteous Judge. There are a lot of Christians who don't want to talk about the wrath of God – we're happy to talk about God's love, but we avoid – sometimes even deny – his holiness and his justice! We'd rather forget the righteous wrath of God. But if we never talk about the wrath of God, if we never talk about the sinfulness of sin, and if we never talk about the fact that God condemns sin – our sin! – we can never fully understand the *depth of love* that God has shown us in Christ. We can never understand what real, godly peace is.

Jesus came, St. Paul tells us, “to reconcile to himself all things...*making peace* by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20). God loved us enough that even though we had committed treason against him, rejecting him totally and replacing him with our own false gods and idols, he himself came to die so that we can be reconciled to him. Our sins demanded justice, but in the person of Jesus, God submitted himself to that perfect justice so that we wouldn't have to. God wanted us to be reconciled and restored to his fellowship so much that he gave us his only-begotten Son that we might have eternal life. That we might have peace.

If we want to understand what it means to be a peacemaker, Jesus is our standard and our measuring rod. That's what the blessing part of this beatitude gets at: the peacemakers shall be called “sons of God.” Again, Jesus isn't suggesting that our adoption as sons and daughters of God is based on a mechanistic or legalistic observance of peacemaking. We need to understand it in terms of Christ-likeness. We are called as followers of Christ to conform to his image and to his example of life. Think of it this way. If you insult someone by calling him a “son of a dog,” you're not intending to insult his mother. The point of the insult is to liken the person to a dog based on the way he acts. In this case, Jesus is saying that those who make peace – his kind of peace, not a worldly or humanistic peace – will be called “sons of God.” Not only will other people see them living according to Christ's pattern and example and call them sons of God, but God himself will affirm us as his sons, as our works give evidence of our faith in him.

The true peace that God gives is first and foremost reconciliation between God and man, but the natural outgrowth of that is also reconciliation between men. We don't come to the Father on our own seeking forgiveness, we all come through Christ, and we are all indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. This is why we can talk of the Church as the Body of Christ. We're all different, we're all individuals, but we all partake of the same new life in him. In him we have our communion. John Owen wrote about our unity using the illustration of a man going out into the woods to gather up kindling for his fire. As he picks up a stick here and stick there his bundle of firewood grows, but that bundle

is made up of all sorts of different sticks – some are long and some are short, some are fat and some are thin, some are twisted and others are straight – but the man is able to bind them all together with one piece of rope so that he can easily carry them all home together. Christ has done the same thing in his Church. He's gathered all sorts of different people tied together with his redeeming blood and Holy Spirit so that he can carry us home in peace. If you cut that bond of peace, you cut the cord that Christ tied himself. This is why this beatitude is important. It's not just some airy-fairy hippie ideal where we all walk around saying, “Peace, man” to everybody – it's the life that Christ has given us. This is a command. St. Paul wrote to the Colossians saying:

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. (Colossian 3:15)

and to the Ephesians:

I therefore...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)

St. Paul understood that peace is costly – it requires that we give up ourselves, just as Jesus did:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:4-8)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about “cheap grace,” but I think we can also talk about “cheap peace.” In a lot of respects that's what the world wants. The world doesn't want true reconciliation in the biblical sense – it just wants to sweep all our differences under the rug. And that's sometimes an easy thing for us to do,

especially in the Church. Think about a time when a brother or sister offended you or sinned against you, and instead of dealing with that offence, you just swept it under the rug and wrote that person off. You figured it was easier to simply remove that person from your circle of friends and get on with your life, fellowshiping with the people who haven't offended you and whom you still consider your friends. It's often easier to do that than to seek true reconciliation with the offender. Granted there are times when we can choose not to take offence at something that someone else does and to put the matter behind us, but most of the time that's not what we do. We go on with our business, but we write that brother or sister out of our life and continue to hold a grudge against them.

But Christ's standard is higher than that. When we sinned against him, he lovingly and mercifully chose to die for us and to reconcile us fully with the Father – to bring us into full fellowship. He dealt with our sin and offence in a way that allows the Father to remember it no more – to blot it out of his record book. Christ never dies for anyone, and then says, “I never really liked that guy anyway, so it's fine with me if he just hangs out there on the fringes of the Church. I'm happy here at the centre with all the people I like.” If we write a brother or sister out of our lives, what we're doing is cutting that bond of peace that Christ has used to tie us together. Pretty soon the whole bundle of kindling will fall apart and pieces of wood will be scattered everywhere. And once the bond of peace is cut there's nothing left to put new pieces of wood in – the bundle's done, finished. It doesn't work anymore. “Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder” are words that can apply just as much to the fellowship we have in the Church as they do to the new husband and wife. And so we're called to seek out the offending brother or sister and seek reconciliation. This isn't always an easy thing to do. It may mean that we have to confront our fellow believer with his or her sin and call on them to repent. If they refuse, then it means the whole church goes to them and calls them to repent and come back into fellowship. We do what it takes so that Christ's peace can be restored to the Body. And if we responded to the original offence with an offence in return, or if we let our pride get the better of us in the way

we've been treating that brother or sister, it might mean that we'll need to eat some crow and go back to them humbly and ask forgiveness for our own offence. But this is the only way that Body of Christ can maintain its God-given unity and purity. Scripture calls us to live out our unity in Christ, but it also calls us to exhort one another to holy living.

On the flip side, while we can all think of someone who's offended us in the past, I'm guessing that we can all probably think of times that *we've* been the offenders. None of us is perfect, but if we're to be peacemakers we need to remember that when we sin against someone else we also need to seek peace through reconciliation. We need to seek the forgiveness of the one we've offended, and if we've sinned in ignorance we need to be ready and willing to hear the rebuke of our fellow believers when they come to us seeking peace.

All of this is hard to do. The natural man can't do it – which is why the world is the way it is. The Spirit has to be at work in us first, bringing our lives around to conform to Christ's example. You see, there's a reason why Jesus doesn't start the Beatitudes with "blessed are the peacemakers." We can't be peacemakers until we know who we are before God. To be a peacemaker you first have to be poor in spirit, you have to be able to mourn over your sinfulness, you have to be meek, knowing that you're no better than anyone else in the world. The peacemaker has a new understanding of himself in light of the other beatitudes. He knows just how miserable and wretched he is before God. He knows that God owes him no favours, and that he can make no demands on other men or women, because he is no better than they are. He's the one who understands what Jesus meant when he said, "He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). He's the man with Kingdom eyes and with Kingdom priorities and who can have pity on sinful men and women knowing that he was once just like them: blind to their own sin and deceived by the world, the flesh, and the Devil. The peacemaker is the man who puts the glory of God above everything else in his life.

Because he has a Kingdom perspective on life, the peacemaker puts the needs and

right of others before his own. He deals graciously with others. I like Martyn Lloyd-Jones' description of him as one who listens. Think about that: the man who is full of himself is always talking about himself – who he is and what he's doing – and not usually ready to listen. But to seek reconciliation and healing we need to know the needs of others. We need to stop and listen to the people around us. The man who listens more than he speaks is also less likely to offend. St. James tells us, "Let every man be *quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger*" (James 1:19).

But the peacemaker does more than simply seek to live out the unity of the Body of Christ. He also looks at the world, looks at things going on around him, and looks at every action he takes in light of the Gospel. Jesus was the ultimate peacemaker and if we look at his life we never see him asking, "What's in this for me." He sought the Father's glory and he sought to reconcile us with God. And so the peacemaker follows Our Lord's example and in everything he does he thinks of the implications it has or will have on the cause of the Gospel.

And this is where we see peacemaking become something we actively pursue. We're inclined to be lazy about this. We think it's okay to be passive in our peacemaking – to do our best not to offend others. But if we follow Jesus example, peacemaking becomes something we're called to pursue as a vocation. He tells us, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink." We tend to think of peacemaking as walking away from a fight, but Jesus tells us that real peacemaking means blessing your enemy when what you really feel like doing is walking away smug in the knowledge that, if you didn't clobber him today, at least someday in the future he'll die and get his comeuppance in hell. A real peacemaker, who is poor in spirit, who mourns, and who is meek can take the abuse of another person and truly mourn the sin of that offender, saying as Jesus did, "Father forgiven them, for they know not what they do." A true peacemaker understands what it means to "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44 KJV).

Jesus' goal was to reconcile sinful men with God. Our goal is to spread that message of reconciliation. And so Jesus calls us to the work of peacemaking – not just being *peaceful*, and not just *wishing* for peace – but actually seeking it out and making it. Remember that you are the only "Jesus" many people will ever see – and so you have to ask, when people look at you do they see someone who has conformed to the image of Christ? When people look at you do they see a man or a woman who has found peace with God? When people look at you do they see God's peacemaker?

Please pray with me: Our Father, we thank you that in reconciling us to yourself through the blood of Jesus you have given us "that peace which the world cannot give." Remind us daily that your peace is not something about which we can be passive. Remind us that it's not something to squander or to keep to ourselves. Give your grace so that we will be bold enough to share it with others, that we will bring unity in your Body, and that we will share your reconciling love with the world around us. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.