

....[when] the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest, justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field. **The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.** My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Isaiah 32:15-18

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons [and daughters] of God. Matthew 5:9

Peace I leave with you; **my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.** Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all **pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.** Peacemakers who sow in peace raise **a harvest of righteousness.** James 3:17,18

Blessed are the Peacemakers....

For the past two years, it has been extremely rare to watch or listen to a newscast without being vividly reminded that the world seems to be in a perpetual state of violent conflict. That sense was already there long before February 2022, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine "moved it to the front burner and brought it to a boil" because its consequences so quickly impacted much of the rest of the world. The brutal October 2023 surprise attack by Hamas fighters on Israeli settlements near Gaza, followed by Israel's relentless, devastating response upon all the residents of Gaza ever since, has only added to the inferno. When in the midst of all that bad news I read about blessed peacemakers in Matthew 5:9, the seventh of Jesus' eight Beatitudes, I can't help wondering, "**where are all those sons and daughters of God?**" The world sure could use them at this moment in history.

I have long suspected that Jesus purposely placed this Beatitude near the top of what Clarence Jordan in *Sermon on the Mount* calls "the stairway into spiritual life." He knew that **bringing genuine peace into situations of human conflict would require the spiritual depth and strength gained from daily practice of the first six Beatitudes.** It is only by living in constant awareness of our need for God, in mourning over sin's destructiveness, in complete surrender to Christ's Way, in passion for the rightness of God's intentions, and in mercy towards others like God's towards ourselves, that our hearts can be purified from self-will. Jesus knew that such selflessness was the only way for people to gain a clear vision of God's presence and desires in the charged atmosphere of human conflicts. Without that vision, one human will simply prevails over another human will. The conflict may be temporarily paused or managed, but genuine, lasting reconciliation and peace are not gained.

Like Father, Like Son Clarence Jordan wrote in *Sermon on the Mount* that Jesus promised that true spiritual peacemakers **would be called sons of God because they were doing the very same thing they had seen their heavenly Father doing – making peace.** The whole point of the Incarnation was God taking on human flesh, living as an example for us, then dying sacrificially and rising miraculously to prove that he forgives our sin and longs to be reconciled – at peace – with us (Ephesians 2:11-18). "He himself is our peace..." He accomplishes that by first changing our hearts, then helping us to leave the sin that separated us from him (John 8:11).

In early February, professional basketball star LeBron James became the first NBA player ever to score 40,000 points in his career that began in 2004 when he was drafted right after finishing high school in Akron, Ohio. Even when James was a high school junior, Ohio sportscasters were showing highlights of his games at Akron and predicting he would skip college, turn pro at age 18, and have a stellar career. They were right. One of the angles covered by reporters last month was the "like father, like son" story about James' son LeBron Jr. ("Bronny") who currently plays for the University of Southern California basketball team. There were lots of comparisons of the skills and statistics of father and son, and considerable speculation about Bronny's NBA prospects. I didn't get the impression that LeBron was forcing Bronny to do the hard work to excel. Bronny is doing that because **he watched his father for years and wants to be like him.** There was even talk of them hoping they might be NBA teammates for a year or two before LeBron retires. **In the spiritual life, the Prince of Peace will never retire.** He invites us to be at peace with him by knowing him, watching him and learning from him to do what he does, and to become his teammate in the work of eternity, the work of helping others find that same peace.

Peacemakers, Not Peacekeepers The United Nations began organizing "blue helmet" **peacekeeping** operations in armed conflict zones in 1948. Their general purpose has been to monitor ceasefires, keep warring parties separated, monitor weapons and troop movements, protect civilians, and **maintain a nonviolent status quo** while diplomats work on securing a treaty or permanent end to hostilities. In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer stressed that **Jesus calls his disciples to be peacemakers** who might at times be led nonviolently to restrain harmful activity or behavior, but who do not stop with that. With the Spirit's leading and empowering, their goal is always to help troubled and troublesome people find peace with God, peace within themselves, and peace with other people. It requires of the disciple a renunciation of all violence, in acknowledgment that ultimately nothing is gained by hurting people. **Bonhoeffer points to Jesus hanging on Golgotha's cross as the peacemaking example to which we are called.** In

order to facilitate our peace with God and to overcome evil with good, he chose to endure suffering rather than inflict it upon others. Only in the mercy and purity of heart gained from previous Beatitude steps is such a choice possible.

The Peace We're Blessed to Make does indeed arise from hearts transformed by faithfully practicing the Beatitudes that precede it. In Hebrew, that peace is **the shalom of God**, the holistic well-being of experiencing firsthand his redeeming, protective love; of being in nurturing, affirming human relationships; and of adequate provision for basic human needs. It is a well-being which makes violence and selfish greed not just unnecessary, but counterproductive.

Make Peace that is Visionary With hearts purified by being filled exclusively with love for Christ and his Way, disciples are enabled to "see" God, to see God's perspective on every situation or conflict that arises. Rather than taking human sides, they are helped to see God's unique, wise solution to seemingly unsolvable conflicts – a "third way" -- and they call upon everyone to choose it. They see God's desire to save and redeem, not to destroy (John 10:10).

In **I Samuel 24 and 26**, King Saul and his soldiers were out searching for David to kill him because Saul perceived David's popularity among the Israelites to be a threat to his kingship. While David was evading capture and hiding, he twice had the opportunity to kill Saul and end his exile. Both times, he chose to spare the king's life, explaining that "I must not lift up my hand against the Lord's anointed." In Quaker terms, he saw "that of God" in Saul and refused to harm him.

As he prepared his disciples for his return to the Father, Jesus told them in Matthew 25 about things that would happen near the end of human time. He spoke of a shepherd separating sheep and goats to illustrate the good outcome ahead for the righteous and the trouble ahead for the unrighteous. He praised the kind treatment he had received from the righteous when he was in trouble, causing them to ask when that had happened. His reply was, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." He was appealing to his disciples to learn always to see that of God in all others, and to treat them all in a spirit of *shalom*.

Make Peace that is Wise Early in his reign, King Solomon asked God for wisdom to rule wisely. Soon thereafter, two women fighting over the true motherhood of an infant came to him to settle their dispute (I Kings 3:16ff). Rather than take a side, Solomon listened to God for a "third way." He called for a sword to cut the baby in half, instantly causing the real mother to beg the king not to harm the baby and give it to the other woman. I don't endorse the brutality his ruse suggested, but it does illustrate the value of asking the Lord for a better way.

Make Peace that is Compassionately Effective One of my favorite Old Testament stories is that of Elisha being hunted by the king of Aram and his army (II Kings 6:8ff). They surrounded the city where Elisha was, but before they could capture him, Elisha asked the Lord to blind his enemies temporarily. Elisha and his servant led the blinded enemy soldiers into Israel's capital city, prayed for their sight to be restored, prevented Israel's king from executing them, fed them a "great feast," and sent them home to Damascus. The story ends with the statement, "so the troops from Aram stopped raiding Israel" (6:23) That ceasefire didn't last forever, but it was a start.

Make Peace that is Authentic and Personal When George Fox was pressured in 1651 to pick a side in England's civil war, probably in exchange for favorable treatment, he told the officials that "I live in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars...." and refused to fight no matter what they offered. The modern Catholic mystic Thomas Merton is quoted in *Following the Call* writing that "peace means hating injustice, tyranny, greed, and disorder – and hating them in myself first" before looking anywhere else. That's authentic and personal!

Make Peace that is Consistent The Friends in England in 1661 wrote these words to King Charles II to assure him they were not plotting an uprising against him: "The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to [prohibit] us from a thing as evil, and then again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world."

Contemporary Catholic writer and peace activist John Dear wrote in *Following the Call* that this simple seventh Beatitude "throws out thousands of years of belief in a violent God...., and gives us a new picture of what God is like." He points out that during Jesus' wilderness testing (Matthew 4), he answered every one of the devil's challenges with Truth, not with violence. Another contemporary Catholic writer and scholar Peter Kreeft adds that in responding to the world's violence with spiritual meekness, Jesus wasn't just being nice. He was delivering on his promise to the disciples (and to us) at the Last Supper (John 14:27) **that he was leaving us peace unlike anything the world can offer.** It is *shalom* with our Creator, with ourselves, with each other, and with creation. It is the peace of the indwelling living presence of the One who created it all. It is peace that is the ultimate strength. He wants to indwell us and give us *shalom*. Thanks be to God!

--Ron Ferguson, 10 March 2024

Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection

- 1) What is your favorite Bible story or biblical example about peacemaking?
- 2) In your view, why are the first six Beatitudes so essential to a life of effective peacemaking?
- 3) Why is the Hebrew word *shalom* so much richer and fuller in meaning than the English word "peace"?

4) In your experience, what is the peace Jesus promised which the world cannot possibly supply?