

Living the Good Life: The Virtue of Peace

Matthew 5:9-12

Most of us understand that we are living in a time of increasing political polarization. The Pew Research Center has been conducting a survey since 1994 on Americans agreement or disagreement with ten different policy statements, statements like “Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good” and “The best way to ensure peace is through military strength.” The goal of this survey is to find out how far apart people from different groups are and which factor leads to the most polarization. They have found that levels of polarization have remained relatively constant when it comes to race, gender, religious attendance and education. The one area where the polarization has increased exponentially is political party affiliation. In other words, the political parties are moving further and further apart on their views on various issues of policy.

Now, coupled with that increase in polarization over issues is an incredible increase in hostility toward those of the opposite party. So, it’s not just that we see the issue of the size of government or military intervention different than the opposite party. Now, Americans increasingly think that those who are on the opposite side are the real problem and deserving of our aggression.

I’m telling you this to help you understand what sort of a world we are increasingly living in. It’s a culture shaped by different ideas and hostility toward those who think differently. There’s no doubt that as we are immersed in this world we mimic the attitudes and dispositions of those around us. Christians are increasingly people of hostility because the world is shaping us rather than the kingdom of God. I’m not arguing that there are never times for righteous anger over a policy issue. But I do want to take seriously the words of Jesus in the Beatitudes this morning.

If Jesus is really describing the good life with the Beatitudes than our culture is on the fast track in the opposite direction. But, our call is to be those who live out the virtues of the kingdom of God and bring a little bit of heaven to earth here by the type of people we are in Christ. As followers of Christ we are called to be people of peace. We are to be those who love and pursue reconciliation in every arena in which we live, and this quality defines the good life.

Open your Bibles to Matthew 5:9-12 this morning and we are going to talk about the virtue of peace. Let me read these verses for us.

You can see in these verses that the word “blessed” is used 3 times and that’s why I believe there are 3 Beatitudes here. But you can also see that the last beatitude in verses 11-12 is similar to and expands on the 8th one in verse 10. So, we’re going to discuss the last two under one point this morning and here’s what we will see from this passage. **2 Paths to Peace in a Chaotic World.**

1. Actively Pursue Peace in All of Life (v. 9)

I know it can be tempting to hear the call for peace as a hippie like plea for us all to just get along. I believe our world’s desire for peace is an echo in us of God’s design for the world. The earth and the relationships between human beings were to be peaceful. But, of course, sin brought great conflict into the world. After the all Adam and Eve begin blame shifting and God’s judgment on them reveals that conflict will be a constant reality in this life.

God tells the serpent there will be enmity between him and the woman. He tells Eve that her desire will be contrary to her husband and he tells Adam that his work will be difficult as the ground will fight against his attempts to cultivate it and provide from it.

But of course, in Genesis 3 God promises that a seed of the woman will destroy the conflict causing serpent and things will be made right. As the OT prophets anticipated the coming reign of the Messiah, one of the defining features of their expectations was peace. Listen to Isaiah 9:6-7 and how the great hope of God’s return to His people through Messiah was a worldwide reign of peace.

Now listen to Zechariah 9:9-10. The instruments of war will be taken away and his reign will be one of peace and prosperity. But as we’ve already said, this isn’t our experience now. It’s quite the opposite. Right now there are 4 major wars happening around the world. A major war is one in which at least 10K people died in 2018. Plus, there are a multitude of smaller armed conflicts happening all over the world. Beyond international war, we have political unrest, racial tension, workplace disputes, domestic violence and even just arguments and struggles between friends and family members that no doubt took place this week among many of us seated here this morning.

Strife, war, bitterness, and conflict are so common that we have come to assume these postures. But what does Jesus say in 5:9 about living well? Notice, it's not just those who want peace and who value peace. Most people in the world say they would love to have peace. Jesus says that his kingdom disciples must be those who acquire the virtue of being a peacemaker. They actively and intentionally seek to foster peaceful relationships and help others overcome conflict in every arena in which they live and move. One author said it this way:

"Happiness is not bestowed on those who love peace or even on those who are peaceful themselves but on those who actively make peace. In view is an activist, aggressive stance toward conflict and controversy, which summons those committed to peace not only to seek but also to construct conversations, alliances, relationships, treaties, and political and social structures that have the possibility of achieving meaningful reconciliation." - Carl Holladay

Are you this type of person? Or, do you love the drama of a good conflict? Listen to what Proverbs has to say about this: "Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan peace have joy." -Proverbs 12:20

But, let's make sure that we understand what peace is not. Peace is not glossing over differences. It's a perversion of peacemaking to ignore differences and be a people pleaser who just wants everyone to be happy and ignores injustice. You can obtain a perversion of peace this way, but it ends up ignoring wrong doing and often harming the most vulnerable.

Instead, peacemaking is hard work that honestly deals with sin and wrongdoing. It acknowledges the brokenness of the world and then seeks conversations and creates relationships that bring understanding, love, and healing to those suffering from strife. You and I will probably never negotiate a middle eastern peace treaty, but this virtue will compel us to do the hard work of peacemaking in marriage, church, and culture.

A life defined by peacemaking is certainly a life well lived. Notice what Jesus says is the outcome or result of putting on this virtue in verse 9.

In the Jewish world you were called a "son of ____" in order to identify you with a quality of that person. Of course, we know this to be true. Children resemble parents. Bethany is always amazed at how similar my bo-legged walk is to my

dad's. You could say, it's obvious Nathan is a son of Charlie because of the way he walks.

So, what is Jesus saying here? You and I are never more like God than when we pursue peacemaking. Those who resolve conflict are acting out of a divine impulse. Why would he say that?

Think for just a moment on how God pursues peace. Human beings rejected His Word and His rightful authority. We rebelled and introduced conflict. We turned our backs on Him. Yet, He pursued peace and reconciliation with us. Listen to Colossians 1:20. We were enemies and now we have become family.

God pursues peace with mankind by the work of Jesus Christ, but the peace flows out from the vertical reconciliation we have with God to the horizontal reconciliation that results with one another. Listen to this incredible explanation of this in Eph. 2:13-18.

We are like God when we pursue peace because this is what God does in our salvation. Then we turn around and pursue peace in every area of our lives because our reconciliation with God compels us to be peacemakers in the world in which we live.

2. Graciously Endure Persecution with the Future in Mind (v. 10-12)

I've already told you that peace-making isn't easy and there will be those who don't like it when we pursue peace in God's way. We don't overlook sin, but we seek conversations and relationships that bring people together. This will threaten some and inevitably they will turn on the sons of God. Let me read verses 10-12 and these last two Beatitudes to you.

What can we say about the ones who are persecuted here?

First, it is because of close association with Jesus. Notice in verse 10 it is because of righteousness sake and in verse 11 it is because of me, meaning Jesus, and in verse 12 it places you in the company of the OT prophets who were persecuted before Jesus.

The persecution here is because of righteousness sake. In other words, I think the case can be made that this person is actively demonstrating all the other qualities

given in verses 3-9. They are living in a particular manner that brings mockery and condemnation from those who aren't living this way.

The persecution here is not simply because others disagree with my political views or because I am rude online. Suffering for Jesus does not include democrats making fun of republicans or vice versa. Notice that Jesus says that the people are uttering all manner of evil against you falsely. There's no basis for their slander in your character or actions. The only basis for the persecution is your master. Listen to 1 Peter 3:13-17. Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering for their association with Jesus. Peter certainly suffered for being a follower of Christ. But notice what he says in verse 14. The word "blessed" here is the same word used in Matthew 5 and Peter is basically repeating this Beatitude. According to verse 18 you are simply imitating your Lord when you experience persecution.

Second, the persecution here includes verbal harassment in verse 11, but is not limited to that. Notice the example of the prophets in verse 12. They were certainly verbally harassed, but many were also physically threatened. This sort of verbal harassment is becoming an increasing reality for believers in our country. While this is genuine persecution according to Jesus, we can't forget our brothers and sisters around the world.

We tend to think of America as sort of the center of the global church, but at this point in history that's nothing more than narcissism. The church is in decline in Europe and America but is growing like wildfire in Asia, Africa, and South America. Some estimate that 72% of the global church is currently found on those continents and in China alone there are an estimated 175 million believers.

But places like Asia and Africa are not easy places to follow Jesus. Look at this map from a group that tracks levels of persecution around the world. Ironically enough, the church is booming in some of the places where it's most difficult to be a Christian. Why?

Third, because persecution leads to the good life because of the confidence and knowledge of future rewards. Those who are persecuted for righteousness sake are the ones who will enter the kingdom and who will be rewarded. Notice the wording in verse 10.

Verse 10 bookends the Beatitudes by promising that the persecution indicates the good life because of the kingdom of heaven. Verse 12 expands that hope by actually promising a reward in heaven for those whose lifestyles identify them with Christ. The promise of reward here builds motivation and confidence to endure the verbal harassment and threat of physical violence.

So, when you begin to display the qualities that Jesus says make up the good life, people will take notice and you may suffer as a result. But even that suffering only further increases your experience of a life well lived because of what awaits you in heaven.

Now, some may hear this expectation of verbal insults and persecution and desire to retreat into our Christian communities and avoid living out our faith in the world. I want you to notice in verse 11 that the language begins to shift and Jesus begins directly addressing the believers who are with him. Up until now these statements have been describing the good life in general. The very last one makes it very personal by using the word “you.”

That shift is on purpose and necessary to prepare us for verses 13-16 where Jesus will say you are the salt and light. The possibility of persecution shouldn't cause us to retreat. It should cause us to advance into the world in order to do good as kingdom representatives. And that's where we'll end this series next Sunday.