

James C. Howell

What Does the Prince of Peace Require of Us?

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God"
Matthew 5:9

All Christians are required to be pacifists. Let's bracket political policy out of the discussion (for the moment) and think about what the angels sang to the shepherds when Jesus (the "prince of peace") was born: "Peace on earth." When he grew up, he said "Blessed are the peacemakers."

Jesus does not say, "Blessed are those who have peace," although we come to God longing for some peace in our hearts. Jesus does not say, "Blessed are those who prefer peace, wish for peace, or await peace," however fond we may be of peace. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, those who make peace." The Greek word literally means "doers of peace" or "makers of peace."

In response to a sermon in which I spoke about Jesus and his apparent obsession with peace, a parishoner e-mailed me, explaining how boneheaded and irresponsible "passivism" is. Merely a spelling error? or did this person (who is hardly alone) think of "pacifism" as "passivism," that somehow "peace" suggests that we do absolutely nothing? that we be passive in the face of evil? Jesus did not say "Blessed are those who are passive and do nothing," but "Blessed are the doers of peace,

the makers of peace." Pacifist means "peace-maker," something we must do. To do peace, to make peace, you have to get busy, you have to act, you have a world of work ahead of you.

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Think about your family, your coworkers, anybody, everybody. Christians never, ever settle for warfare and tension. They doggedly make peace. Christians never settle for the bogus kind of peace that pretends, or politely nurtures old grievances, or privately harbors piercing criticisms. We seek out the other person and strive valiantly for peace. Christians never settle for peace by mere force. If dad shouts and waves a mighty fist, and his wife and children cower silently, there is no peace in that home.

Genuine peace is deeper, richer, giving life to those in the home, and in the world, letting them be free to be the people God made them to be, not walking on eggshells but dancing in the streets, clenched fists opening,

receiving the once clenched fist of another, a veritable Virginia reel of joy. Peace, when we labor to make peace, opens a faucet that lets a poison run out of the soul, and in the emptied place, deep joy, calm hope and God's Spirit gather.

I suspect that very many of us need to do some peacemaking (to be pacifists) during this season when the angels will be singing of peace. With whom are you not at peace?

How do we make peace? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "There can only be . . . peace when it does not rest on lies and injustice." Christians dare to speak the truth with the one from who we are alienated—gently, tenderly, and listening, expecting the other person has some truth to tell, too. We learn how to disagree, not how to avoid discomfort.

For peace to be made, anywhere, any time, some shift in power relationships has to happen. For a tall, muscular guy with a 20-inch sword to be at peace with a little scrawny guy with a pebble in his hand, the big guy has to relinquish his bigness, he has to decide not to tower in intimidation; and the little guy has to decide not to run, not to be a sneaky guerilla in jealousy over the big guy's sword. When the strong befriend the weak, dignity and strength are imparted to the weak—although the dignity and strength flow both ways, don't they?


Peacemaking is all about love, which isn't an emotional mood, but a tangible action. Jesus said, "Love your enemies," and "Love your neighbor." Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. We never get rid of an enemy by meeting hate with hate; we get rid of an enemy by getting rid of enmity. By its very nature, hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds up."

And wasn't Bonhoeffer right? "The forgiveness of sins still remains the sole ground of all peace." We may do a lot of pretending, or we may "kiss and make up" in the home to try to paste on some peace, when our real need is to dive into the thicket of the issue and try to understand, acknowledge, strategize, and mostly to forgive. **We may shrink back from forgiveness, from peacemaking, not merely because it's hard work, but because there can be something darkly delicious about an unhealed grievance.** Unforgiven sin tangles us up in some barbed wire that lacerates the soul.

Forgiveness isn't always a warm fuzzy feeling. If you forgive me, it doesn't mean you feel like showering me with hugs and kisses. Forgiveness is a decision, a commitment to look at me through God's eyes, to stick with me. In the comedy film, *Bruce Almighty*, the insensitive, knuckleheaded Bruce is finally broken down by life, broken-hearted over squandering his relation-

ship with Grace—and in his humbled misery finds himself face to face with God, who asks, "What do you really want, Bruce? Do you want Grace back?" Bruce, finally understanding, surprises even God by saying "No. I want her to meet somebody who will love her, who will see her the way I see her now—through your eyes." How can we see as God sees and not make peace? or rather let God's Spirit make peace through us? □

James C. Howell is senior pastor of Myers Park UM Church in Charlotte, N.C. and author of several books, including *The Beautiful Work of Learning to Pray*, *The Kiss of God: 27 Lessons on the Holy Spirit*, and *The Life We Claim: The Apostles' Creed for Preaching, Teaching, and Worship*.



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