

Sermon Title: Pursuing Peace
Biblical Text: Romans 14:19
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Preacher: Jason C. Helveston

Romans 14:19

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Last Sunday I ended the message with an off-the-cuff idea which I think deserves more attention. Though we explored it a bit back in Romans 12, it was still underdeveloped. In fact, my wife called me while I was out for a run on Monday and suggested we take more time to settle into this thought; the thought being, *we're commanded to always forgive but not always to reconcile.* Today will be a relevant tangent to explore this more.

In his recent book on forgiveness, Pastor Tim Keller observes how much of our society has become disenchanted with forgiveness. While at the same time the church has become almost militant about forgiveness.

Keller quotes author Delia Owens, who wrote the bestselling novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*. She summarizes our broad social distaste for forgiveness in her book when she asks, *"Why should the injured, the still bleeding, bear the onus of forgiveness?"* (198). Her sentiment is shared by many. Forgiving someone who has deeply wronged or hurt us seems like placing an undue burden on the offended party. Forgiveness seems harmful.

As this perspective has gained favor in popular culture, through cultural moments like #MeToo and the racial reckoning of 2020, it seems like Christians are going the other way. In the past few years, countless stories have been reported of congregants being forced to forgive church leaders who have been spiritually, emotionally, and sexually abusive. Survivors have essentially been asked to forgive and forget while those in power remain in power. Counselor Diane Langberg corrected this unbiblical idea when she tweeted recently, ***"It misrepresents God when we tell victims of atrocious, life-changing abuse to simply forgive and forget. Forgiveness of any wrong, let alone a life-shattering one, is never a 'just do it' task."*** Perhaps we have completely misunderstood forgiveness.

Keller calls this *unconditional forgiveness*. I think what wider society loathes and what the Church often employs is a brand of forgiveness which suggests peace can (and even should!) be achieved without justice. If nothing else, this reveals that we need a more nuanced and wider understanding of Paul's instruction in Romans 14:19 to ***"pursue what makes for peace"***. So that's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about the multifaceted nature of pursuing peace in our relationships. If you remember, last week we looked at peace with God, within ourselves, and peace with others. I'd like to focus on that last aspect of peace. Specifically I want to reflect on the three primary ways the Bible talks about making peace with others: *forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration*. Hopeful this will help us gain some wisdom about which degree of peace we can achieve within our various relationships and conflicts.

So that's how we'll organize our time, and each movement will build upon the previous in a way ...

- *Forgiveness*
- *Reconciliation*
- *Restoration*

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-35, Romans 12:8, 2 Corinthians 5:19, Psalm 103:11-12, Jeremiah 31:34)

One of Jesus' most compelling stories about forgiveness is found in Matthew 18. Please meet me there. The Apostle Peter has just asked Jesus, *how many times should I forgive my brother?* Peter suggests seven times. Seems like a lot, *right?* Well, Jesus answers, *seventy-seven times*. In other words, we should always forgive.

Jesus then tells a story ... A servant owed his master an insurmountable debt. Because he didn't have the money the master ordered that the servant, his family, and all his possessions be sold to pay off the debt. The servant begged for mercy and the master, Jesus says, ***"forgave him the debt"*** (Matthew 18:27). In the next scene the servant found a fellow servant who owed him a much smaller sum. That servant begged him for mercy, but instead of extended the forgiveness he received, the first servant ***"refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt"*** (v.30). Well, the master finds out about the merciless way the servant acted and changes his original decision. He throws him in prison until he could pay off the debt. Jesus summarizes the story's lesson this way, ***Read Matthew 18:35 ... "So***

also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. " If we want to understand what Paul means by *pursuing peace*, forgiveness is the place we must begin.

Back in Romans 12, which we covered in January, Paul gave us some parameters for pursuing peace. He said, ***Read Romans 12:18 ... If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*** He says, *if possible*. He says, *as far as it depends on you*. Those are the parameters. I think what Jesus is getting at about forgiveness then is that forgiveness is always possible because forgiveness only depends on you and me. Forgiveness is a work, Jesus says, ***from your heart***. And so, we should always forgive. But usually takes time, especially if we've really been hurt. And it requires understanding a bit more about the nature and pathway of forgiveness.

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is agreeing to pay a debt. In Jesus' story, the master has lent the servant money in some way. By forgiving him the master is agreeing to pay that debt. In other words, the debt doesn't simply disappear. The master agrees to cover the debt himself. He relieves the servant's burden by carrying that burden himself.

When it comes to our relationship we have to name the debt. We have to name the sin or the offense that has been committed. In fact, in a meeting this week someone reminded me of the power of this discipline. After all, we can not forgive a debt we have not named. More to the point, the first step in pursuing peace, in forgiveness, is identifying the debt or conflict or the need for peace. Only then is true

forgiveness possible because in forgiveness we are agreeing to pay that debt or shoulder that burden.

As with last week, our cosmic forgiveness empowers us to grant forgiveness to others. Paul told the Corinthians, *Read 2 Corinthians 5:19 ... **God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.*** Notice, God *does* count trespasses. But the miracle of grace is that he does not count those sins *against us*. *Why? How?* Well, because on the cross the Father was counting our sins against his Son. Like the first servant in Jesus' story, God has named your sins and agreed to pay your spiritual debt. Therefore you and I are empowered to name the sins committed against us and begin the work of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is also a new way of seeing a sinner. When the master extended forgiveness, he no longer viewed the servant as a debtor. And the Father no longer sees us as sinners. But rather, the psalmist says, *Read Psalm 103:11-12 ... **For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.*** You see, because the burden of sin has transferred to Christ through forgiveness, we are seen as sons and daughters, not sinners. In fact, God tells the prophet Jeremiah, *Read Jeremiah 31:34 ... **"For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."*** God forgets our sin.

Yale professor Miroslav Volf has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of forgiveness. In his book *Free of Charge* he explains forgiveness as the practice of detaching the doer from the deed. He talks about forgiveness as a gift we give for our sake, but more for the sake of the other. Forgiveness is pursuing peace by refusing to see a person who sins against us through, and even, as their sin. Volf

says, "*To forgive means to release the condemned wrongdoer not just from punishment but from guilt*" (172). In our hearts, we detach the doer from the deed. It's seeing your neighbor, not as a manipulator or liar or selfish, but as someone who bears the image of God. It's seeing your mom or dad, not as the person who was absent in your childhood nor as the blamer who always made you feel like their mistakes were your fault, but as someone for whom Christ died. It's seeing your child, not through their most recent pattern of sin, but as the gift that they are.

They may not confess any sin. They may never repent. They may never even face consequence. But you can forgive them. Within your own heart, by the power of the Spirit, and, with great sins, over time and counseling and community ... you can name the sin, shoulder the debt their sin incurred, and detach the doer from the deed. You can forgive. And perhaps this is all that is possible, perhaps this is all that depends on you. Perhaps this as far as you can *pursue peace* with some people and in some situations. Nevertheless, you have.

Movement 2: Reconciliation (Matthew 5:23-24, 1 Peter 3:18, Matthew 18:15,16,17)

In Jesus' story, forgiveness is the only amount of peace that's achieved. There was no reconciliation. There was no restoration. *Why?* Because there was no repentance. Proverbial forgiveness takes one person, but reconciliation and restoration require two.

In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus addresses the power for reconciliation. He's teaching about anger. As he does throughout the sermon, Jesus reframes the law around the heart. In this case he explains that the commandment to not murder is

actually broken, not simply if you kill someone, but if we harbor anger in our hearts toward each other. Jesus says, *Read Matthew 5:23-24 ... So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.* Notice, we're considering this from a different vantage point. Not as the one who needs to give forgiveness, but from the perspective of someone who needs to ask for forgiveness. Presumably, the brother knows he's been sinned against. And so reconciliation is possible. Remember, reconciliation requires two people. So what Jesus is describing here is repentance. When we sin against someone we should not only name the sin but live differently as a result. That's repentance and repentance makes reconciliation possible.

What's reconciliation?

Reconciliation is the practice of bringing people back together through repentance and forgiveness. It rejoins what was previously unified and harmonious. It's friends being friends again. It's lovers being lovers again. It's family being family again. And like forgiveness, reconciliation with others flows out of our experience of reconciliation with God. It's cool to see Peter's development through the biblical narrative. The same guy who thought he should only forgive someone seven times, grows deeply in his understanding of reconciliation. He later writes, *Read 1 Peter 3:18 ... For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.* That's our cosmic reconciliation. The cross makes reconciliation possible. It make it possible to retrieve the unity and harmony of the garden. Through Christ a way is made for guilty sinners to be "brought back to God." But

enacting this reconciliation requires repentance. When we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus' work of reconciliation, only then are we brought back to God. We are reconciled with him. This leads us to be people of reconciliation.

Jesus actually builds on his teaching about reconciliation and repentance from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 18. Just before his story about the unforgiving servant, Jesus delivers his most practical teaching on the subject. He gives us three steps to take when seeking reconciliation with someone who has sinned against us ...

- **Step 1:** Jesus says talk to the person who sinned against you. He says, look at v.15, *Read Matthew 18:15 ... "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother."* This tells us that though forgiveness is an inward work of our hearts, (in most cases) we should address being sinned against directly and give a chance for reconciliation. We should give a chance for repentance.
- **Step 2:** Jesus says brings others with you. He goes on, *Read Matthew 18:16 ... "But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."* If addressing the sin individually doesn't work, we should bring others with us who either witnessed the offense or can corroborate the behavior.
- **Step 3:** Jesus says tell the church. By this he either means bring in the leadership team or elders, or make their sin a community matter. He says,

Read Matthew 18:17 ... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Treating them like a Gentile or tax collector is not a pejorative. But rather it's a mission. He's saying, *preach the gospel of reconciliation to them because they obviously are unfamiliar with it.*

What Jesus is getting at here is that when we've been sinned against we should not make a passing attempt at reconciliation. We should, Pauls says, ***"pursue what makes for peace."*** We should work really hard to push for peace as far as we can with someone. But, it may not be possible. It may not be within our power to reconcile a relationship. And walking through the steps of Matthew 18 gives us that clarity. From another vantage point, we should be very careful to not take lightly someone coming to us, who gives us a chance to repent and seek reconciliation. We should refuse to defend ourselves, but humbly listen and do our best to ***"pursue what makes for peace."*** Of course, don't make up something to confess, that's bearing false witness. But we should think deeply about what they're saying and allow the Holy Spirit to bring us conviction and correction so we can be reconciled.

Movement 3: Restoration (Luke 15:18-19;22-24,

Revelation 21:3-5)

All this to say, we still may not reach full restoration. Forgiveness shoulders the burden of sin and frees the doer from the dead. Reconciliation brings people back together through repentance. But sometimes even after forgiveness and reconciliation things are not exactly as they were before the sin.

You see, even after forgiveness and reconciliation ... friends are friends again, but not in the same way ... lover are lovers again, but new limits of intimacy are introduced ... family is family again, but boundaries are now in place to provide various levels of safety and accountability. Reconciliation does not mean everything is exactly as it was. It doesn't everyone keeps their jobs. Reconciliation is not the absence consequence. This is the lie countless church have and do believe when their spiritual leaders sin egregiously. We have naively believed that forgiveness and reconciliation mean no consequences are necessary. Regretfully, many abusive preachers remain in their pulpits to this day because the church has cowardly practiced a type of forgiveness void of real justice.

All this to say, sometimes another level of peace is possible. Sometimes restoration is possible. Relationship can become something more than they were before. Relationships can enjoy a complete restoration when and where consequences do not redefine the relationship. But, let me say before we lay this out, this is hard work ... this is rare ... and this is not always possible.

What is restoration?

In a series of lessons on loss—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son—Jesus gives us a picture of what restoration looks like. In particular he talks about a son who asks his father for his inheritance. This was tantamount to wishing your father was dead in Jesus' day. But the father concedes and son takes half his father's money and spends it all lavish and foolish living in the far off country. The boy comes to his senses one day and makes his way home. On his way home he rehearses his apology. And in his words we get a window into his expectation for a reconciliation with new boundaries and limits. He said to himself, ***Read Luke***

15:18-19 ... I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” He's ready to repent. He's not only willing to name his sin but also address the hurt he's inflicted on God and his father. But notice, he doesn't expect restoration. He expects a type or reconciliation in which family is family again, but new boundaries are set in place to provide safety and accountability. The son is not wrong in this. He's pursuing peace. He's asking for forgiveness. He's repenting. He's asking for reconciliation. But, he's not asking for complete restoration ... a return without limits and a refreshed relationship. You see, the offender can't ask for this. The offender can't make this happen. Restoration must be initiated by the offended party.

That's exactly what the father does. Jesus continues the story. The father sees the son, still at distance, has compassion on him, runs to him, and embraces and kisses him. And as the son begins his apology the father cuts him off with party plans, **Read Luke 15:22-24 ... But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.** The son is not downgraded to a servant. Consequence isn't centered in a new type of relationship. What was lost was fully retrieved and completely restored. That's restoration. And again, this is really hard work. Let's not let Jesus' story mislead us into thinking this must always be the posture of an offended person. In fact, I imagine if we could fast-forward a bit to the next time the son needed some money, that was an awkward moment. Or the next time the father had a hard time sleeping, like all those nights the son was away, there would have been a chance to harbor bitterness. Like forgiveness and reconciliation, restoration is not

simply a moment in time but a practice of naming sin, shoulder burdens, paying debts, rebuilding trust, coming back together, and resetting limits ... and choosing to continually pursue peace as best as you can.

Ultimately though, Jesus' story isn't about us. Well, at least the father's willingness to restore relationship is not about us. Rather, the father portray to us the type of love and willingness to restore what was lost the Heavenly Father has toward those who are willing to pursue peace. Restoration must be initiated by the offended party. Jesus is saying, that's precisely what God has done.

You see, restoration is the complete expression of *shalom*. And through Christ, as we discussed last week, shalom has been restored between you and me and the Lord. We have peace. We've been restored. And while in our human relationships restoration is not always possible this side of Christ's return, when he does comes back we are promised that the fullness of his mercy, justice, love, and power will rule and reign in the new heavens and new earth. John saw this vision of a future reality. *Read Revelation 21:3-5 ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."* A day is coming when God will be with us, and we with him. No more tears. No more death. No more lament. No more pain. No more *not yet*. No more sin. No more need to forgive. No more need to reconcile. No more

need to set boundaries and limits. No more need to pursue peace. *We will only know restoration.* We'll know *shalom* ... wholeness and completion and peace.

- Forgiveness shoulders the burden of sin and frees the doer from the dead. In Christ, we are forgiven. So we must forgive.
- Reconciliation brings people back together through repentance. In Christ, we are reconciled. So we must repent and, when possible, pursue reconciliation.
- Restoration reclaims all that was lost, without limits. In Christ, we are restored. Therefore, when possible, we must pursue restoration.

Who do you need to forgive?

Who do you need to ask for forgiveness?

With whom do you need to reconcile?

With whom do you need to be restored?