

“THE PURSUIT OF PEACE”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Mt.5:9

In the opening chapter of his book, Peace of Mind, Josh Leibman tells how, as a young man full of “exuberant fancy” he decided to draw up a catalog of the most desirable qualities in life. He gave the matter a great deal of thought and finally came up with a list of seven things: Health. Love. Beauty. Talent. Power. Riches. Fame. When he was through, he took his list to an old friend who had been a spiritual mentor to him, handed him the list and said,

“This is the sum of moral good. If a man could possess all of these, he would be as a God.”

His friend studied the list for a moment and Josh Leibman says,

“I saw wrinkles of amusement begin to gather in the corner of his eyes, and then I heard him answer, ‘An excellent list, well digested in thought and set down in reasonable order. But it appears, young friend, you have omitted the element of all. You have forgotten the one ingredient without which everything else becomes a hideous torment and your list, as a whole, is an intolerable burden.’”

“What is that missing ingredient?” asked Leibman. His elderly friend took a pencil stub and crossed out everything on the page and then, having demolished the young man’s adolescent dream structure in a single stroke, he wrote down three words: peace of mind.

“This is the gift God reserves for special proteges,” he said. “Talent and beauty he gives to many. Wealth is commonplace. Fame not rare. But peace of mind, that is his final guerdon of approval. The fondest sign of his love. He bestows it charily.”

Well, we can heartily agree with Josh Leibman’s friend that peace of mind is much more desirable than fame or wealth, beauty or health. But there is one point with which we cannot agree. And

that is assertion that God gives peace only to “his special proteges.” Jesus made it unmistakably clear that the gift of peace is for all that place their trust in him. He put no limitations upon his promise when he said,

“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you.”

It is something he made available to everyone who is willing to fulfill the prescribed requirements.

And, of course, that’s the rub,” *fulfilling the prescribed requirements*. Happiness does not come by merely wishing. It belongs to those who pursue it. And, our text is a case in point.

“Happy are the peace *makers*.”

Note the word “*makers*.” That is, those who work for it and at it.

“Peace of mind is not something that can be bought in bottles, or applied like a cosmetic to the surface of the skin. It cannot be attained by taking a tablet, or by enrolling in a course three evenings a week.”

Peace of mind can only come in a certain way and at a specific price. And, because the price of spiritual peace is high, there are many “bargain-seekers” who never quite obtain it.

Of course, there are some kinds of peace which are not worth having anyway. Hugh Martin, in his helpful book ,The Beatitudes, details the different kinds of peace. One is --

The Peace of Indifference

“Some people just couldn’t care less that there are millions of homeless refugees and displaced persons. It doesn’t bother them a bit that sickness and loneliness are all about them. They are like the rich man Dives in Jesus’ story. He never noticed Lazarus. He accepted him as part of the street scenery. He just couldn’t be bothered by a lonely beggar. And, Jesus denounced him for this indifference. His was the peace of a soul that is dead. The peace of stagnant pond with a green scum of selfishness on top.”

And then, as Martin explains, there is --

The Peace of Resignation

This, too, is unacceptable to the true Christian. I say *true* Christian, because it wasn't too long ago that some churches were heard singing a song that went something like this:

“The rich man and his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And *ordered* (that is, *determined*) their estate.”

I was talking to a young lady several months ago who was living on the ragged edge of despair and anxiety. When I suggested a few ways in which she might overcome this she replied,

“But, it's God's will that I should feel this way.”

Well, if you will pardon my language: nuts! To ever say it is God's will that life should be miserable and unmanageable is pure poppy-cock. His will is the direct opposite! And yet, as Martin points out,

“There are many who use the Christian faith in this distorted way. They argue that it is God's will that people should suffer. That the world should be out of joint. That the rich and the poor are what they are because God made them so, and there isn't anything that can or should be done about it. But such people who talk and think that way simply do not know what the Christian faith is all about.”

When it comes to the wickedness which pervades this world, our Lord said,

“I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

We Christians, every last one of us, are engaged in a mighty war against evil. We are in training, all the time. We are in the combat zone, all the time. Every time we win a battle, a little bit of the kingdom of hell dies, and a little bit more of the Kingdom of Heaven comes on earth.

But, until “the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of our Christ” there is no room for the false peace of indifference, of resignation to the evils of the world. We must be ever and always in the front line trenches.

Christians are a fighting force with a great war on our hands. But,

“It’s great to be out where the fight is strong,
Out where the heaviest troops belong,
In this fight with God for man.

It sears the body, it racks the brain,
It pierces the heart ‘til man’s friend is pain
Does this fight for God for man.

But it’s great to be out where the fight is strong,
Out where the heaviest troops belong
In this fight with God for man.”

As Hugh Martin declares with such power,

“Peacemaking has nothing whatsoever to do with indifference, recognition, cowardice, or love of a quiet life. It is a far cry from the popular peace-at-any-price philosophy that grips the minds of many today. It doesn’t lead people to say, ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace. It is not escapism. It is not a mere patching up of things, a temporary wiring together of a broken engine that really needs a general overhaul.

“The peace of which Jesus is talking is in reality, ‘the cessation of civil war.’ The gaining of an armistice within a man’s own soul. The bringing of an end to the war which has raged within him. A unifying of the conflicting desires and ambitions which have created turmoil and strife. And, until man is at peace with himself, there can be no peace in the world. As long as he is at odds with himself, he will be at odds with others. That’s why Jesus made it so unmistakably clear that we must be born again. We cannot be at peace with our self, or with others, until we are at peace with God.”

There is a Chinese proverb that says,

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

And, if we would reach our goal of peace of mind, if we would achieve happiness -- here and now, if we would take the first step toward peace, and change ourselves by changing our relationship to God, we must make a peace --treaty with him, and thus come to terms with ourselves.

In one of his sermons, Jesus said,

“A house divided against itself cannot stand.”

In commenting on that text, Ralph W. Sockman, who has one of the most helpful books on the Beatitudes I have ever read, points out that there are three ways in which a man can be divided within himself.

Inner Self and Outer Self

Sometimes a man is divided between his innerself and his outerself. I suppose we could say, “He’s putting up a good front.” By that, we mean he is hiding behind a facade of pretense. As Sockman points out, the Pharisees were guilty of this and that’s why Jesus called them “whited sepulchers.” They were beautiful, ornate, whitewashed tombs which were lovely without, but full of dead man’s bones within.

The Pharisees were worried about what the neighbors would think. They used up all their energy trying to be something other than they were. As a result, they were unhappy. In blunt language, they were hypocrites! And, a hypocrite can have no peace. Unless what we appear to be on the outside and what we actually are on the inside are in harmony, we are miserable.

That’s why Jesus begins his work in a person’s heart at the center and works to the circumference. He changes a person from the inside out. He not only tells us to be true to our self, he also shows us what our true self is. He gives us peace on the inside and, in the process, makes it unnecessary for us to pretend on the outside.

Forward Drive and Backward Pull

And then, according to Sockman, a second way in which a person can be divided within himself is the constant struggle that goes on between his forward drive and his backward pull.

Charles Allen in his wonderful book God's Psychiatry tells the story of a little girl who was trying to button her dress in the back. Finally, she gave up and went to her mother for help, saying, “I can’t do it because I am in front of myself.” Well, physically we are made to go forward, to walk backward is awkward. We are so put together that we move through space more efficiently when we are moving forward, rather than backward.

But, when it comes to mental activity, it is just the opposite. Dr. Allen points out,

“We can think better backwards than forwards. We know what happened yesterday, but we can only guess about tomorrow. Thus, it is easier to live in the past, and when we do, we very often load ourselves down with futile regrets over the mistakes of yesterday.”

Somewhere in the lobby of the New York Stock Exchange there is a sign which says,

“He who looks back dies of remorse.”

Satchel Page, the world famous, ageless Negro pitcher, was once quoted as saying,

“Never look back. Somebody might be catching up!”

Both of those suggestions or sayings, are in harmony with the teachings of Jesus who said,

“No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God.”

Or, as Charles Allen puts it,

“When a person continues to look back to something he should put behind him, when he keeps reopening yesterday’s decisions, weakening himself with futile regrets, he is not fit to be a peacemaker, for he has not found the secret of peace. To correct this forward-backward tension, Jesus taught us to cut ourselves loose from that part of the past which has come under God’s grace and forgiveness.”

The old gospel hymn put it this way,

“Christ breaks the power of canceled sin, and sets the prisoner *free*.”

Free from the guilt of yesterday’s mistakes.

Free from the lure of old temptations.

Free from the bondage of habit.

Free from remorse and worries.

Free from the thought of future judgement.

Why? Because we know the past is forgiven and forgotten, and can no longer rush in to spoil the peace that is ours today.

Our Lower and Higher Natures

I am quoting Ralph Sockman a lot this morning, but frankly, he says it much better than I can.

“Perhaps the most destructive way in which a man can be divided between himself is in that division between his higher and lower nature. It is true that we are made of ‘such stuff as dreams are made of,’ we are also such the stuff as animals are made of. Who does not understand Paul’s self-analysis, ‘The good that I would, I do not; but the evil that I would not, that I do.’

“Sometimes we think that we can get rid of this inner conflict by letting down and living on the lower animal level, ‘doing what comes naturally.’ The prodigal son tried that, but the husks of indulgence did not satisfy him(very long). ‘No man can serve two masters,’ said Jesus. ‘Ye cannot serve both God and mammon.’ We cannot, at one and the same time time, be true to our lower and our higher natures. We cannot be faithful to *both* God and mammon. We must true between them. And, when we make the right choice, when we choose God, when we choose Christ, then we achieve that higher happiness which is the by-product of enjoying the ‘peace that passeth all understanding.’”

One of the greatest thinkers of all times was Copernicus. It was his tremendous insight into the

nature of the universe which revolutionized our way of thinking about our world. On his grave in Frauenburg there is this saying,

“And I do not seek a kindness equal to that given to Paul. Nor do I ask the grace granted to Peter. But that forgiveness which Thou didst give to the robber, for *that I earnestly pray.*”

That’s the way in which each of us can begin to find peace. By taking the first step in a lifelong journey. By saying with the thief on the cross, “Lord, remember me.” And when we *do that*, Christ brings order out of chaos, unity out of division, stability out of instability, security out of turmoil. We become “children of God,” as we read in John 1:12. And then, having entered into the peace of God, we are free to become peacemakers. We seek to share with others what Christ has shared with us.

In his book, The Secret of Happiness, Billy Graham describes a cartoon he had seen of a man rowing a boat toward a golden shore labeled “heaven.” All around him were men and women struggling in vain to reach the shore in safety, but he was heedless of their peril. He was singing, “I am bound for heaven, hallelujah!” Billy goes on to say, “that is not an adequate picture of the Christian faith or the Christian life.”

I agree. If we are truly born again we will crawl out of ourselves and will struggle at whatever sacrifice, to bring others under the canopy of God’s grace. Billy illustrates this by asking us to visualize a right-angled triangle sitting on its horizontal base. At the apex or highest point of this triangle is God. At the point where the perpendicular line meets the baseline is you. And then, at the opposite end of the horizontal line, are others. Billy says,

“Here in geometric form we have a diagram of our relationship to God and man. The peace of God flows down from him to us, and out to our fellow men, as we become the conduit, the channel through which it flows.”

Thus we see that peace is not an inactive word. It is not something related to Christmas tree

angels, shepherds being “caroled at” by cherubs, or fancy-dressed magicians offering brick-a-brac to a shining baby. Instead, peace is a practical, hard-working, real-life, positive word. It is faith in action, reaching out at whatever costs or consequence, whatever pain or penalty, to bring God and good into the lives of those who were once ruled by sin and satan.

As Charles L. Allen points out,

“Peace is a positive force. You may clear a plot of land of ever noxious weed, but that will not make it a garden. It will only be a barren field.

It becomes a garden when flowers are growing there. And thus, to have peace in both the world and in our own souls, we must not only rule out hate, suspicion and fear, we must plant love and joy and understanding.”

Peace is not something that is stumbled on. Peace is something to be made. It is the produce of those who pursue it. And, when we make peace in that way, when we make peace with God and allow him to make peace with others through us, then we are called the children of God. Not only by men, but by God himself. He recognizes us as members of his family, because we bear a likeness to his Son who, among other things, was called “The Prince of Peace.”

Happy are the peacemakers. Those who earnestly strive for it. Who doggedly work for it. Who persistently pursue it. For they shall be called “the children of God.” Wow!