

A Season of Peace Sermon Series
“Living Peace”
Matthew 5:23-24, 6:12, 14-15; Luke 17:3-4
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When you are trying to make something like a cake or chocolate chip cookies, you must use the right ingredients. If you do not, you are not going to end up with the thing that you were trying to make, or at least not a particularly good version of it. I first started baking in elementary school when my mother taught me how to bake two of her favorite treats- brownies and chocolate chip cookies. I was excited to learn how to make those things because they were two of my favorite treats, too, and I was a quick learner. I could usually make a delicious batch of brownies or chocolate chip cookies, but there was this one time, I remember, when my cookies came out tasting very strange. They *looked* right, but when you took a bite, it was obvious that something had gone wrong. So, I went back and reviewed my steps and what I discovered was that I had left out the salt. Who knew that salt was an essential ingredient in chocolate chip cookies? Chocolate chips-essential. Sugar- essential. But salt? Well, I am here to tell you that, yes, salt is an essential ingredient when you are making chocolate chip cookies!

Over the last 4 weeks, we have been talking about making something that can be a little more complicated to make than chocolate chip cookies. We have been talking about peace – where it comes from; how to receive it; how to extend it to others, and today we are finishing our series by talking about a single, essential ingredient that is required for peace to even be a reality. That ingredient is forgiveness.

We have three short Scripture readings this morning, two from Matthew and one from Mark, and they are all pieces of Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness. The first two from Matthew are excerpts from the Sermon on the Mount, and the passage from Luke is an excerpt out of a longer passage in which Jesus gives instructions to his disciples about how they ought to live. Let us read them in order, starting with Matthew 5:23-24.

²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

**And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.**

¹⁴ For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. ⁴ And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive."

From these three teachings, we find out some important things about forgiveness the most basic being that Jesus says we are supposed to do it. Sometimes there is a little bit of resistance when someone tells us that we should do this or that, but when Jesus tells us to do something, it is because he loves us, and he is trying to lead us down the road that leads to life. The Holy Spirit invites us to trust Jesus and to obey his instructions- like this one -even when they are hard instructions to follow. So, we need to practice forgiving, and we also see in these passages, particularly the first one, that there is a sense of urgency about it. We should forgive, but we should also forgive sooner rather than later. Forgiving or seeking someone else's forgiveness should be a top priority.

Jesus uses the illustration of the person coming to offer a sacrifice to make this point. The person is coming to offer a sacrifice at the altar- they are coming to *worship God*-what could be more important than that? But, Jesus says, the person who realizes they have hurt or offended someone ought to leave their sacrifice and go patch things up before making the sacrifice. One Bible commentator noted that this would have sounded almost comical to the Galileans who had to travel 3 days to get to the Temple to make a sacrifice. It is like, "so you're saying, Jesus, that if I travel 3 days, get to the Temple and realize there's someone I've hurt, that I'm supposed to just leave the animal there and turn around and make the 3-day journey back and resolve things before making *another* trip back to offer my sacrifice?" That seems inefficient and impractical, but Jesus's answer was yes because it is that important. Even worship can wait while we tend to our relationships with others.

Another thing that we learn from these passages is how important it is to both seek and extend forgiveness. The first passage is humbling as it reminds us that it is possible that someone is hurt or angry because of something we have done. Sometimes we are the one who makes that first tear in the fabric of a relationship, and when we do, we need to be the ones who take the first steps to mend the tear. The last passage challenges us when we are on the other side, when we are the offended party. You must rebuke the offender, which means it is ok and even right to say, "what you did was wrong and what you did hurt me." Scripture never calls us to ignore or minimize the reality of hurtful and wrong actions against us, but we are called to forgive. And there are lots that can and that needs to be said about how we forgive while also creating and holding to boundaries that may be very necessary in certain situations. The instruction to forgive repeatedly does not mean that you are supposed to go back repeatedly to an abuser who is going to keep hurting you. Forgiveness does not have to mean that we stay in a relationship with someone. It just means that we find a way to let go of the resentment and anger that fuels destructive reactions and behaviors. Forgiveness keeps hurtful situations from escalating into even more hurtful situations which is why it is so important.

A last thought about forgiveness that we find in these teachings is that there is a direct connection between God's forgiveness and our forgiveness. Psalm 130:3-4 says, **"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you."** And in Psalm 103 we are told, **"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. As far as the east is from the west so far has, he removed our transgressions from us."** God shows us incredible mercy, and because we have received mercy from God, Jesus teaches us to extend that same mercy to others. NT Wright describes forgiving others as we have been forgiven as passing on a drop out of the bucketful that God has already given you.

Jesus acknowledges a potential problem though when he says that God will forgive you if you forgive others but will not forgive you if you withhold forgiveness from others. This contradicts the idea that we find elsewhere in Scripture that God's forgiveness is not something that we earn. It is by *grace* you have been saved through faith, Paul says, it is a *gift* from God and not by our works so that no one can boast. It seems, then, that Jesus is not saying here that God cannot forgive us if we withhold forgiveness, but he is pointing out the hypocrisy of being willing to receive but not extend forgiveness, and he is saying that it will make it difficult to enjoy close fellowship with the One who has so freely forgiven us. NT Wright uses an illustration that is helpful. He says that the forgiveness that we have received from God is like "the air in your lungs. There's only room for you to inhale the next lungful when you have just breathed out the previous one. If you insist on withholding it, refusing to give someone else the kiss of life they may desperately need, you will not be able to take any more in yourself, and you will suffocate very quickly. Whatever the spiritual and moral and emotional equivalent of the lungs may be... it is either open or closed. If it is open, and able and willing to forgive others, it will also be opened to receive God's love and forgiveness. But if it is locked up to the one, it will be locked up to the other."

We have just spent 5 weeks on a sermon series called A Season of Peace and thinking about peace for a season of time is good, but what we long for, and what God has made possible through Christ, is lasting peace. We are challenged today to embrace what Jesus has both modeled and taught us about forgiveness because forgiveness is that essential ingredient to peace. To be at peace means to be reconciled to God and others, and forgiveness paves the way for reconciliation. We are reconciled to God through Christ who prayed for the crowds and the soldiers from his cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," and we are reconciled to others when we give and receive forgiveness. Forgiveness involves letting go of the anger, and resentment, and vengeance that perpetuate hurt and conflicts and it involves reaching instead for compassion, healing, and mercy. Those are the things that turn resentment into restored relationships, and where relationships are restored, there is peace.

Living this pattern of receiving God's forgiveness and extending it to others is the way that we can create and extend peace in our world, and that is something we are called to do. Scripture tells us that God has given us the *ministry* of reconciliation and

living this pattern is the way to conduct that ministry of reconciliation. Paul says that we are ambassadors for Christ – we have been entrusted with this message that God is a forgiving and reconciling God – and we are called to let people know that good news by talking about it but also by living it.

All that we have heard this morning comes together for us at Jesus's table where we will gather in just a minute. At the table God confirms that we are forgiven. Despite our failures and our unfaithfulness, Jesus invites us to come and eat because he calls us his friends. At the table we experience that peace that we have with God that has come to us through forgiveness and we receive the grace we need there to be able to forgive as we have been forgiven. Amen.