

“A River Runs through It”

Responsive Reading, “Peace”¹

Twenty-five years ago, a movie came out starring a little-known actor, Brad Pitt. It was a semi-true story based on the lives of brothers Norman and Paul MacLean, who lived with their dad near the Blackfoot River in Montana. You may remember the film. It was called *A River Runs Through It*.²

As I’ve thought about rivers this week, I’ve realized for the first time how significant rivers have been in the places I’ve lived. Atlanta, where I grew up, is on the Chattahoochee. Memphis, where my parents spent most of their lives, is on the Mississippi. Georgetown, Kentucky, where I went to college, is on the North Elkhorn. When I was a summer missionary in California, I worked beside the Cazadero. In Charleston, South Carolina, in the Navy, it was the Cooper.

When we lived in Ft. Worth for seminary, it was the Trinity River. Our first pastorate, in Carlisle, Kentucky, was on the Licking. We spent sixteen years in Louisville, beside the Ohio. When we were in Bristol, Virginia, before coming here, we were on the Holston. And here in Columbia, we have the Patuxent and the Patapsco. It’s quite a list. I suppose I could say of my own life that “a river runs through it.”

The same might be said about the Bible. At the beginning of Genesis, there was an unnamed river that watered Eden (Genesis 2:10); and at the end of Revelation, in the New Creation, that river appears again as “the River of the Water of Life” (Revelation 22:1-2). In Ezekiel, the River of the Water of Life is foretold (Ezekiel 47:5-12), and in Isaiah, we have the beautiful image of “peace like a river” (Isaiah 48:18, 66:12). So, for the Bible, too, “a river runs through it.”

Our focus this morning is on the third “fruit of the Spirit,” “peace,” and the image I hope you’ll remember is “peace, like a river.” The word for “peace” in the Old Testament is “shalom,” and the word for “peace” in the New Testament is “eiréné.”

These days, we tend to think of “peace” as a condition characterized by absence: absence of conflict; absence of war; absence of trouble, etc. The ancient Greek philosophers thought about peace in similar ways, but this is far too pale and anemic. The biblical idea of peace/shalom/eiréné is far more robust. Biblical peace means not just freedom from trouble but the presence of everything that makes for our highest good.

Biblical peace has to do with wholesome and nourishing relationships, both with other people and with God. Biblical peace has to do with the tranquility of heart and mind that results from the deep and pervasive conviction that our life and our future are in the hands of God.

A good synonym for what Paul meant when he included “peace” in the “fruit of the Spirit” might be “flourishing.” Would you use that word about your life as you sit here this morning? Are you “flourishing”?

Paul liked to use the phrase “grace and peace,” and one commentator noted that “Grace is what God is like, and Peace is what happens when you experience it.” In our responsive reading a few minutes ago, we were reminded that God is a “God of peace” (Hebrews 13:20), and that God gives us “the peace of God” (Philippians 4:7). We were reminded that joy and peace are gifts that come as a package (Romans 15:13), and that Jesus Himself “is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14a). In

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 13, 2017.

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_River_Runs_Through_It_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_River_Runs_Through_It_(film))

Ephesians, Paul noted that before we were born again (John 3:3), we were “*without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace*” (Ephesians 2:12-14a).

This peace, God’s Peace, can be received, but not understood. It must be experienced to be known. We can sense God’s Peace in those who possess it, and we are attracted to them.³

This peace, this flourishing, doesn’t come from houses or lands, not from power or fame, not from parents or position—God alone can give it. This peace, God’s Peace, can only be received from God’s Spirit within.

I want to suggest to you this morning that there are at least four conditions that must be met before God’s Peace and Flourishing become real and robust in our lives. The absence of any one of these conditions will prevent our experiencing the peace to which Paul referred in the Fruit of the Spirit. We might call this The Four-Fold Path to Peace, and we’ll look at each in turn: trust; obedience; forgiveness; and restitution.

TRUST. The opposite of a peaceful heart and mind is an anxious heart and mind; and many have noted that we live in an age of anxiety. We might even say that we live in *The Age of Anxiety*. By some estimates, a third of all Americans take some sort of anti-anxiety drug.⁴

Jesus told us some important things about anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34). First of all, Jesus told us that anxiety is unnecessary. God knows what we need before we know that we need it, much less ask for it.

Jesus told us that anxiety is useless. Worry can’t add even one second to our lives. In fact, anxiety may actually shorten life – and it certainly makes life miserable while it lasts. Doctors tell us that a high percentage of physical illness is actually psychosomatic anxiety. There may be worse sins than anxiety, but there may not be any more damaging ones.

And Jesus told us that anxiety is unbelief. Anxiety is an affront to God, showing that we really do not trust God to love us, to take care of us and to provide for us. This little ditty isn’t in the Bible, but it’s a good summary of what Jesus told us in this section of the Sermon on the Mount:

“Said the Robin to the sparrow, I should really like to know why these anxious human beings rush about and worry so. Said the sparrow to the Robin, well I think that it must be that they have no heavenly father such as cares for you and me.”

Many of us use Proverbs 3:5-6 as one of the spiritual anchors of our lives, and rightly so. Those verses tell us to “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways know him, and he will make your paths straight.*”

Trust is the key word here. One of the most foundational and transformative things that ever happens in our lives is to finally come to the deep and settled conclusion that, whether I understand what is happening in my life or not, *God is trustworthy*, and I will continue to put my trust in God.

³ That’s what Paul was talking about when he wrote that “*through us, God spreads the aroma of the knowledge of Christ in every place. For to God we are the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing*” (2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

⁴ <http://www.anxietycentre.com/anxiety-statistics-information.shtml>

My friend, if your heart is not peaceful and flourishing, it may be that you have not yet learned to really trust God. It helps me to remember three Great Truths about God, our Heavenly Father:

1. Remember the *love* of God, which only and always desires what is best for you.
2. Remember the *wisdom* of God, which alone knows what is best for you.
3. Remember the *power* of God, which alone is able to bring about what is best for you.

The first step on the way to peace is to learn to trust the love, the wisdom, and the power of God. The second step is to learn to obey God's Voice and God's Word, completely, fully, and at once.

OBEDIENCE. Some people, when getting a new phone or computer or car or lawnmower or television, just open the box and start pushing buttons. Others open the box just enough to find the manual and read the instructions first. I don't suppose that either choice is a moral issue, but I'll wager that the first group breaks more things than the second group does.

Life is like that, too. God has not set us adrift in the world without a manual, which we know as The Bible, or "The Book." The psalmist wrote about that book that "*Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path*" (Psalm 119:105); "*I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you*" (Psalm 119:11); "*Help me understand your instruction, and I will obey it and follow it with all my heart*" (Psalm 119:34).

My friends, God does not give us guidance in order to fence us off from fun, but to keep us from wrecking our lives. The Bible is shot through with God's guidance, and if you need a place to begin, start with the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and with the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Our focus this morning, though, is on discovering the way to a peace-filled, flourishing life of body, mind, and spirit, and **obedience** to God's guidance through Word and Spirit is the second key to such peace.

Knowing the Will of God is, in most cases, not difficult. While there may be some areas in your life where you are not completely sure of God's will, most of us could fill a chalkboard with the things we already know are God's will. For example, we already know that God intends for us to be born again, to be meaningful, contributing members of a local group of believers, to be constant in prayer and diligent in Bible study, to tithe our income, to avoid all compromising behavior, to be a more compassionate friend, spouse, or parent . . . you get the idea.

Now if your friend, spouse, or parent has asked you to do something, and you persist in not doing it, you are not going to have a clear spirit with that person. If your friend, spouse, or parent has asked you not to do something, and you persist in doing it, you are not going to have a clear spirit with that person. You are going to avoid being with them or having any significant interaction with them.

It is so in our relationship with God as well. If we ignore, neglect, or reject anything that God has told us to do or not to do, the Bible calls that Sin, and Sin cuts us off both from friendship with God and from having a peaceful heart (Isaiah 59:2).

My friend, if your heart is anxious, if you're irritable, if you can't sleep at night, it is worth asking whether or not you're being disobedient to God's Word and Spirit in some area of your life. And if you ask God to reveal such areas to you, you'll not likely have to wait very long for an answer. Keeping your obedience up-to-date is the second essential step to a peaceful heart. The third step toward peace is FORGIVENESS.

FORGIVENESS. Pastor Tim preached on forgiveness a couple of weeks ago, and it was clear afterward that he had touched a nerve. Forgiveness is not for the faint-hearted; but it is an essential step on the way to a peace-filled and flourishing life.

We can't do justice to any of these steps in so short a time, so if you want to consider forgiveness more deeply, the best book I know on the subject is Lewis Smedes' *Forgive and Forget*,⁵ and the best short treatment I know is C. S. Lewis' sermon "On Forgiveness,"⁶ from which I want to share a couple of paragraphs. Lewis begins with considering our own need for forgiveness, then the forgiveness we offer to others:

"If you had a perfect excuse, you would not need forgiveness; if the whole of your action needs forgiveness, then there was no excuse for it. But the trouble is that what we call 'asking God's forgiveness' very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses. What leads us into this mistake is the fact that there usually is some amount of excuse, some 'extenuating circumstances.' We are so very anxious to point these out to God (and to ourselves) that we are apt to forget the really important thing; that is, the bit left over, the bit which the excuses don't cover, the bit which is inexcusable but not, thank God, unforgivable. And if we forget this, we shall go away imagining that we have repented and been forgiven when all that has really happened is that we have satisfied ourselves with our own excuses. They may be very bad excuses; we are all too easily satisfied about ourselves."⁷

"There are two remedies for this danger. One is to remember that God knows all the real excuses very much better than we do. If there are real 'extenuating circumstances' there is no fear that He will overlook them. . . . The second remedy is really and truly to believe in the forgiveness of sins. A great deal of our anxiety to make excuses comes from not really believing in it, from thinking that God will not take us to Himself again unless He is satisfied that some sort of case can be made out in our favour. But that would not be forgiveness at all. Real forgiveness means looking steadily at the sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and nevertheless being wholly reconciled to the man who has done it. That, and only that, is forgiveness, and that we can always have from God if we ask for it."⁸

Turning then to our relationships with one another, Lewis notes that "To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life—to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son—how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where we stand, by meaning our words when we say in our prayers each night, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us.' We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse it is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves. There is no hint of exceptions and God means what He says."⁹

⁵ Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

⁶ C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness," in *The Weight of Glory*, 1949.

⁷ Lewis, pp. 179-180.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 180-181.

⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 182-183.

Now what Lewis has described is not easy. But what he has described is an essential step on the way to Peace. The final step is also related to forgiveness—our own—and it is **restitution**.

RESTITUTION. It is not without reason that steps eight and nine of *The Twelve Steps* are these:

#8 Made a list of all persons we have harmed,
and became willing to make amends to them all.

#9 Made direct amends to such people wherever possible,
except when to do so would injure them or others.

To do the work of restitution is “heavy-duty” soul work, but it is absolutely essential work if we are to have the peace and flourishing of which Paul wrote and that God intends for us to experience. There’s a very succinct explanation of how this works. I’ve told you about it before, but it’s worth telling again.

You may know that the U.S. Department of the Treasury has a fund called “The Conscience Fund.” It’s for voluntary contributions from people who have stolen from or defrauded our government. Most contributions are anonymous, and one gift makes the problem of partial restitution as clear as can be: “Dear IRS, I have not been able to sleep at night because I cheated on last year’s income tax. Enclosed find a cashier’s check for \$1,000. If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the balance.”¹⁰

My friend, if you want peace, REAL peace, then you’re going to have to make an inventory to be sure you’ve repaired as much of the damage your life has done to others as you’re able to repair. Some things can only be left in the hands of God; but there are a great many things within our power to correct . . . and if you want to sleep well, you’ll correct them.

And so we have come full circle. Do you really want a peaceful heart, to experience God’s shalom, God’s flourishing? This four-fold path will bring it about: TRUST; OBEDIENCE; FORGIVENESS; and RESTITUTION. This is hard work; but to hold back at any point is to forgo the gift that God wants to give you: “*If only you had paid attention to my commands,*” God says. “*Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea*” (Isaiah 48:18).

All of us have sinned, and all of us have fallen short of the glory and the peace of God. “*But now in Christ Jesus, [we] who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace*” (Ephesians 2:13-14a). My friends, the way to Peace is open before us. Are you willing to follow that road?

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conscience_Fund

Peace

Leader: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:2).*

People: ***Since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have also obtained access through him by faith into this grace in which we now stand, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1-2).***

Leader: *The LORD gives his people strength; the LORD blesses his people with peace (Psalm 29:11).*

People: ***You will keep the mind that is dependent on you in perfect peace, for it is trusting in you. Trust in the LORD forever, because in the LORD, the Lord himself, is an everlasting rock! (Isaiah 26:3-4).***

Leader: *If only you had paid attention to my commands. Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea (Isaiah 48:18).*

People: ***But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace . . . (Ephesians 2:13-14a).***

Leader: *I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world (John 16:33).*

People: ***Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful (John 14:27).***

Leader: *Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).*

People: ***Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).***

Together: ***Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus—the great Shepherd of the sheep—through the blood of the everlasting covenant, equip you with everything good to do his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Hebrews 13:20-21).***